Communities and Local Government: Working Together

A Resource Manual

“Forging Partnerships for Healthy Communities”

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1. Introduction

What’s This Resource Manual About?

How often has your community group had a good idea, but been unsure of how to work with your local government, or even whom to contact about municipal support?

How often have you, as a municipal councillor or staff person, wanted to develop closer relations and partnerships with your community and wondered how to include them in planning the future of the community together?

A clear understanding of what local governments do, and how they work, is an important first step in making valuable links between the community and its local government. And a stronger understanding about community groups will help governments to make the most of these partnerships.

If local governments and communities are aware of and understand the Healthy Communities approach, they will be able to

- become stronger advocates of healthy public policy
- form useful partnerships to create those policies
- undertake sustainable projects for the benefit of all community members

The Healthy Communities approach offers community groups and local government a process that helps everyone focus their efforts towards a common goal: to strengthen the social, environmental and economic well-being of their community.

This resource manual seeks to create a climate of mutual respect and understanding between community groups and local governments. By presenting Healthy Communities experiences from both the municipal and community group perspectives, this guide offers both groups an increased understanding of the goals of the other and how they can work together to implement Healthy Communities principles.

In Ontario, local government includes a range of organizational structures, from large regional municipalities serving a predominantly urban population to small, mostly rural townships and unorganized territories. As well, the shape and structure of municipal government differs between northern and southern Ontario. There are many aspects to consider when forging partnerships between local government and communities.

This manual was developed with two main purposes in mind:

1. To help community members understand the role and functions of local government, in simple, easy-to-read language; and
2. To provide some tips and examples that could help local government (both staff and elected officials) and community members work together effectively.

In addition, a “Resources” section contains some helpful background information on planning and policy relating to local government and healthy communities.
2. Healthy Communities and Local Government

Many would be surprised to learn that the greatest contribution to the health of the nation over the past 150 years was made, not by doctors or hospitals, but by local governments. Our lack of appreciation of the role of our cities in establishing the health of the nation is largely due to the fact that so little has been written about it.


2.1 The Healthy Communities Model

This manual has been written from a Healthy Community perspective. Healthy Communities/Healthy Cities is an international movement that was initiated in Ontario in 1984 and has since spread all over the world. The Healthy Community model recognizes that, in addition to our genetic characteristics, lifestyle and access to health or sick care services, our health is also strongly influenced by social, economic and environmental factors. The quality of our community life is important because we derive physical, mental, spiritual and emotional sustenance from our involvement with others. A healthy community provides for these basic needs for all its members, and maintains healthy relationships both within and outside of the community.

Within the Healthy Communities approach, each community decides for themselves what kind of community they want in the future and develops strategies that will move them in that direction. Because every community is different, with unique characteristics and dynamics, an approach that worked in one community may not be successful when applied to another. Although it is useful to see the strategies that have been applied in other areas, there are no shortcuts — every community has to work out their own solutions.

Healthy Communities provides a way of thinking about communities and a process for working together towards a self-defined goal. We see communities as dynamic systems in which everything is connected to everything else. In a healthy community, the economic, environmental and social sectors are integrated and work together in harmony to create a high
quality of life for all its residents. The Healthy Communities model identifies four key elements as essential to creating a healthy community: wide community participation, multi-sectoral partnerships, healthy public policy and government commitment.

2.2 Wide Community Participation

For a community to adequately meet the needs of its residents, it must provide many different ways in which community members can interact with each other to exchange information about needs and resources, become engaged in the planning and decision-making processes that affect them, and work together to achieve the common goal of creating a healthy community. People can participate in creating a healthy community in a variety of ways, such as planting trees, learning and sharing with others at a conference, coaching youth sports, or sitting on a municipal advisory committee.

2.3 Multi-Sectoral Partnerships

Many of the issues that need to be addressed to create a healthy community are interrelated. Problems may include unemployment, substance abuse, poverty, inadequate housing or pollution, but when these seemingly separate issues are examined, we often find that they are symptoms of a common root cause; for example, an insufficient economy due to the depletion of natural resources. Business, labour, religious organizations, social services, planners and environmental groups all have a stake in these issues and need to come together to develop a shared vision of a healthy community, undertake joint research and analysis, and develop both preventative and treatment programs. They also need to look at what resources and capacities exist within the community and ensure that they are being used effectively. By sharing their information, expertise and resources and by working together, they will better be able to achieve their goals.

2.4 Healthy Public Policy

Groups that are concerned about the well-being of their community may want to consider becoming involved in creating or advocating for healthy public policy. The Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion calls for putting “health on the agenda of policy makers in all sectors and at all levels, directing them to be aware of the health consequences of their decisions and to accept their responsibilities for health” (World Health Organization, 1998).
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Public policy is “a decision embodied in legislation or an action of a Government, a directive made by a Board of Directors of a private company or non-profit organization with authority to make the decision” (Newfoundland and Labrador Heart Health Program website, accessed January 2003).

Healthy public policy is designed to enhance health and equity for all community members. It creates a supportive environment that makes it easier for citizens to make healthy choices.

Individuals and community groups can influence public policy. The policy-making process can be either top down (initiated by government) or bottom up (initiated by citizens). Participation from both government and citizens is necessary for the creation of healthy public policy. Most politicians want to address citizens’ concerns and are looking for electoral support. Conversely, community members need the support of government to have healthy public policies put in place.

2.5 Local Government Commitment

While many of the forces that shape our lives today are global in nature, it is at the local government level that many of the policies and programs that most directly affect our well-being are made. Public health, emergency services, social services, housing, land-use planning, parks, waste management and public transportation are only some of the areas that are under local government control.

All over the world, local governments have played an important role in the Healthy Cities/Communities movement since it began. In Ontario, more than thirty-five municipalities have passed resolutions supporting healthy communities. They have formed interdepartmental committees to develop and implement Healthy Community strategies, have participated in Healthy Community coalitions, and provided funds, staff assistance and other forms of in-kind donations to Healthy Community projects.

Involving the community in local governance is not easy, and there are often frustrations on both sides. There are also clear benefits to both.

Municipal councillors and staff

- gain access to the experience, knowledge and expertise within the community
- receive the full range of public opinion on issues
- obtain rapid feedback on policies, plans and programs
- have opportunities and venues for educating the public about issues and government constraints
Community members

- become more knowledgeable about community issues and affairs
- increase their awareness of resources and opportunities
- learn how their local government works
- have a training ground from which new civic leaders can emerge
- strengthen their voice at city hall
- may establish liaisons with various government advisory bodies

As the relationship between community members and their local governments are strengthened, the sense of “us” vs. “them” tends to fall away. Through greater understanding, the sharing of responsibilities, increased accountability and collaborative activities, “us” and “them” become integrated into “we.”
3. Local Government Structure

3.1 Introduction

In city halls, township offices and council chambers throughout Ontario, there are many hard-working, committed individuals who act on behalf of citizens and the municipality. They hold meetings, sign forms, fix roads and bridges, provide recreation, shelve books and take on many other day-to-day tasks. But where does a citizen or community group begin when they want to voice a concern, have a by-law changed, have the municipality do something on their behalf or work with the municipality on a community initiative? How can local government staff and elected officials work together with citizens and community groups and be responsive through their actions and their structure?

As Tindal and Nobes Tindal (1979) observe in *Local Government in Canada*, an essential first step in working with local government is understanding the nature of the present system. When working “within the system,” you will probably experience one of two things (and maybe both). The staff of the municipality will bring energy, knowledge and, sometimes, resources to the solution of your problem or the realization of your dream. The second outcome is not as favourable: You may soon see the frustrations the staff face working with outdated regulations, extremely limited resources and restrictions from other levels of government.

At no other time in the history of municipal government has there been as much change as in the past half-decade. Our task, in this chapter, is to understand the new world of municipal governments in Ontario — their power and obligations, services, resources and structure for the delivery of their mandate.

3.2 The Role of Municipal Government

In eighteenth-century Canada, municipal governments were deemed mere “creatures” of the province. Now, as we embark upon the twenty-first century, the rallying cry is for recognition as an “order” of government with expanded financial powers. At a federal meeting of municipalities, a top government leader referred to “senior levels of government downloading problems.” Taking exception to the terms “senior” and “downloading,” Marja Hughes, editor of the *Forum*, points out that municipal government is, in fact, not a “junior” level but an “order” of government being squeezed by the “off-loading” not “downloading” of services by
another order of government (Hughes, 2001). This fundamental shift in philosophy, she argues, should be accompanied by a change in vocabulary. “Our traditional lexicon conveys legislation and structures that are anchored in the mid-1800s,” she says. Federation of Canadian Municipalities CEO, James Knight, strengthens the point:

If federal, provincial and municipal government are partners in supporting Canada’s quality of life, we cannot speak in terms of senior government ... and subordinate municipal governments as mere receptacles of downloaded responsibilities. And if we must talk about a sequence of authority, we should address municipal government as the first order of government — the oldest form of government in Canada, predating Confederation and — as the Supreme Court of Canada has ruled in the case of pesticide use in Hudson, Quebec — the one most attuned to the needs and concerns of citizens who expect it to act as an order of government. (Knight, quoted in Hughes, 2001, p. 4)

According to the new Municipal Act (Rev 2002), the duties of a municipal government are

- the provision of services that the municipality considers necessary or desirable
- the management and preservation of the municipality’s public assets
- the fostering of the current and future economic, social and environmental well-being of the municipality
- the delivery of, and participation in, provincial programs and initiatives

Services that municipalities provide include

- local road network and bridges
- water and sewage
- property assessment
- parks and recreation
- arts and culture
- ambulance
- airports
- sidewalks
- fire services
- police services
- public health
- child care
- social services
- storm sewers
- social housing
- garbage collection and recycling
- property tax collection
- local economic development
- seniors’ housing
- electric utilities
- public transit
- land-use planning
- snow removal
- library services
- animal control
- by-law enforcement
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3.2 (a) Relation to the Provincial Government

The Constitutional Act of 1867 assigned central control over municipal institutions to the provincial government, which, in turn, has delegated the power to control local matters to the municipalities. In the words of an editorial in the Peterborough Examiner, “Ontario’s municipalities have always been government in short pants. Queen’s Park has been the parent, laying down rules, imposing guidelines, and flat out telling municipalities what they will or won’t do whenever it felt the need” (Peterborough Examiner, October 2002). But now changes in the Municipal Act focus on “natural person” powers, which allow a municipality to act or exercise power “in any matter that is not expressly excluded from their competence or exclusively delegated to another entity” (Lidstone, 1998). These are small incremental steps in terms of where municipalities would like to go but, according to David Lidstone, “They’re the only steps that have taken place in well over a hundred years.”

Generally the provincial government has responsibility for

- natural resources and environment
- hospitals and health care
- property and civil rights within the province
- education
- post-secondary institutions
- administration of justice
- social services
- culture and tourism
- provincial highways
- prisons

The province may provide these services directly or may transfer funds to other institutions or corporations to deliver these programs on their behalf.

3.2 (b) Relation to the Federal Government

The federal government has the power to “make laws for the peace, order and good government of Canada” except for subjects where the provinces are given exclusive powers. Typical federal exclusive powers are the regulation of trade and commerce, the post office, the census, national defence, employment insurance, money and banking, copyright, criminal law, citizenship and foreign policy.
3.3 Structure of Municipalities

The structure of municipalities has changed considerably in recent years. Amalgamation in Ontario has been swift and not always welcomed. The number of municipalities in Ontario was reduced from 815 in July 1996 to 446 by January 2002 (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing, accessed January 2003).

Generally, the designation given to a municipality is determined by its size. Hamlets, which have a population below 500, do not have municipal authority. The smallest municipality is a village, which has a minimum population of 500 but not more than 2,000. In order to incorporate, a town must have a minimum population of 2,000. When it reaches 15,000, it may become a city. Some choose not to.

Townships were designed originally for rural areas. Today, some townships next to urban areas are not rural at all. The minimum population for a township is 1,000. Cities are separate municipalities that must have 15,000 people if they develop from a village or town, but 20,000 if they develop from a township. Cities have greater authority but also greater responsibilities than villages, towns or townships.

Traditionally, counties have brought together representatives from all the cities, townships, towns and villages in their area to form an upper-tier government to handle certain responsibilities that are hard for smaller municipalities to deliver. Construction and maintenance of county roads is an example. Most cities situated within county boundaries are part of the two-tier government, but as of January 2002, there were still sixteen separated cities, that is, cities that are within a county but are not part of it (Ontario Municipal Home Pages website, accessed April 2003). Peterborough City, for example, is not part of Peterborough County, which is made up of eight townships plus villages and which completely surrounds the city. Regions are like urban versions of counties; they include several municipalities, from villages and townships to large cities. As of January 2002, there were twelve regions in the province.

Different orders of government have specified responsibilities, and amalgamation has resulted in some confusion over the names of municipalities. Little wonder citizen and community groups become confused about where to start interacting with local government! The best advice is to start local and go up from there.
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3.3 (a) Northern Ontario

Farther north, vast distances and small populations make it difficult to adapt the government structures outlined above. Consequently, the north is divided into districts administered by the province. These include Cochrane, Algoma, Sudbury, Manitoulin, Timiskaming, Nipissing, Parry Sound, as well as the Region of Sudbury (the territory, not the city). Beyond that, there are a number of unique structures to bring government action to the north. These include Improvement Districts, Local Roads Area Boards, Local Services Boards and Planning Boards. Only the Improvement Districts operate like municipalities.

An Improvement District (found only in the north) is designed to accommodate rapid growth in areas where there are no established communities. An example might be an area where a mine or pulp and paper mill has developed. Created by the Ontario Municipal Board, these Improvement Districts are designated only when local citizens or the Ministry of Municipal Affairs requests it. They are administered by boards of three or five trustees appointed by the provincial government. When the population warrants, they may become a village, town or township.

Both Roads Area Boards and Local Services Boards act like governing bodies but they are actually specialized organizations and not municipalities. The Roads Area Board develops roads in unorganized territories. Three trustees are elected annually and the board has the ability to collect taxes. Local Services Boards are established upon citizens’ requests and are responsible for up to six areas of service including fire protection, recreation, street lighting, water and sewer systems and garbage collection. Local requests are usually approved, although the Ministry of Northern Development and Mines makes the ultimate decision on services provided. The Development Area Board is similar to an Improvement District and is designed for rural areas.
3.3 (b) Elected Officials

The head of council is termed *mayor* or *reeve* for single-tier municipalities. The head of county council is called a *warden* and the head of regional government is the *chair*. Mayors and reeves are directly elected — every voter gets to vote for the candidate of their choice. Wardens are generally chosen from among their peers on county council, while regional chairs may be either chosen from among their peers or directly elected. Regional councils include the mayors of all the municipalities within the region and other members directly elected.

The way municipal councillors (sometimes called aldermen) are elected differs from municipality to municipality. Councillors may be elected “at large” or by ward. If they are elected at large, all candidates will represent the entire municipality, and the voter chooses from among all of them. In a ward system, the municipality is divided into geographical sections with roughly equal population, and the ward is represented by one, two or three councillors. Voters in each ward choose from among only those running in that ward.

3.3 (c) Functional Relationships

The basic functional structure of a municipality is as follows: an elected council, an elected (by the people or their peers) head of council, a chief administrative officer or CAO (who has a variety of names in different municipalities, such as clerk-treasurer or city manager) and the staff of the municipality. The head of council is the chief executive officer of the corporation.

Although some councils do all their official work in the council meeting, most councils have a General Committee or Committee of the Whole, which is composed of only councillors. This provides a more informal atmosphere for debate, with recommendations then going on to council for ratification. Where citizens are allowed to make delegations to this Committee, there is input early in the decision-making process. If they cannot present in committee but must wait until council, they will speak to an issue after it has been debated by councillors, positions have been taken, and the first vote has been recorded in the Committee meeting.

Council also has provision under the *Municipal Act* to conduct business “in caucus” (or “in camera”), meaning that observers are excluded and the discussion is not recorded, but the reasons for doing so are prescribed and must be stated. Although the item may be debated behind closed doors, the item from caucus must come into open session to be voted upon. A municipal council that is open to input from citizens and that provides transparency of their process is an important element of democracy.
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3.3 (d) Other Municipal Bodies

What has been outlined above is the bare bones functional pattern, but citizens and community groups would be wise to look beyond this to the many other mechanisms that assist and influence council and staff in making decisions and taking action. Sitting on boards and committees and working hand in hand with staff and councillors is one of the best ways for citizens and community groups to influence decisions made at the municipal level. As a member of a board or committee there is an opportunity to have input as ideas are generated, to provide facts and figures that the committee can work with, and to create an atmosphere of cooperation that helps when conflicts arise. Several such opportunities are outlined below.

Local Board

The most structured of the boards and committees, a local board is defined as a municipal service board, transportation commission, public library board, or any commission, committee, body or local authority established or exercising any power under any act with respect to the affairs or purposes of one or more municipalities, excluding a school board or conservation authority. In addition to those noted above, these bodies include the police services board, public health, the hospital board of directors, district health council, housing corporation, land division, court of revision, and commissions such as the Niagara Escarpment Commission. The board reports directly to council, but it is also charged with implementing a mandate under provincial statute.

Ad Hoc Committees/Sub-Committees/Advisory Committees

All of these are created by council resolution to investigate and report on a particular matter or concern or organize service delivery. Examples include environmental advisory committees, anti-racism committees, heritage advisory committees and social planning advisory committees. They have no legal identity as part of the organizational structure, nor do they possess any statutory powers. They have no authority; council may choose to act on their recommendations or not.

These committees usually have council representation, staff from the municipal departments concerned, and representatives of organizations based in the municipality. This expanded membership provides additional technical knowledge and unique perspectives from the education and experience that participants bring. Once the committee has fulfilled its purpose, its mandate ceases and the committee is dissolved. Some may take on delivery and monitoring of programs and have the appearance of autonomy and, in some cases, become incorporated with an identity separate from the municipal structure.
How are appointments made to boards and committees in your municipality? Is the process transparent? Is there an opportunity for all citizens to apply for positions at the beginning of each year? Answers to these questions should be available to you at the municipal clerk’s office.

3.3 (e) The Administrative Structure

The ways that local government can affect the day-to-day lives of citizens are almost endless (Illingworth, 2000). They pave and plough roads, pick up garbage and recyclables, issue licences, collect taxes, provide water, dispose of sewage, maintain public transportation, and ensure police and fire protection. They provide parks and recreation facilities, day care centres, public health programs, libraries and museums, and administer housing and social assistance. They also exercise various controls and regulatory powers as determined by law or by council. By implementing council-approved official plans and zoning, they can dictate how you may use your property and how your neighbourhood will develop, whether you can run a business in your home or have a swimming pool in your back yard. They can authorize a gas station on the corner of your street or a high-rise next door. And they can assist neighbours in resolving property conflicts.

There are two components to accomplishing all this: policy development and policy implementation. Often we hear that “council makes policy, staff implements policy.” According to Illingworth, this is a total misconception of reality.

There is a continuum from policy making to policy implementation that takes ideas and abstractions like visions, policies, goals and plans and transforms them into observable ends or outcomes — results, programs, buildings, streets, deliverable services. Council and staff share this continuum as partners ensuring each other’s successes. (Illingworth, 2000)

John Carver discusses this partnership as one in which councils define the needs to be met and the outcomes to be achieved. Staff, within council-determined limits, define the means for achieving these ends (Illingworth, 2000).

It would be impossible to describe the variety of organizational structures that have been created by municipalities across the province for the discharge of their duties. The more traditional is the “silos” structure, with the separation of tasks into departments such as public works, parks and recreation, and waste management. Some reorganized municipalities have recognized the interdisciplinary nature of problems today and the need for creative solutions by integrating the traditional silos and creating new structures.
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3.3 (f) The Council Agenda

Regardless of the organizational pattern, there is one function that acts as the bridge between staff and council. This is the production of the council agenda through the office of the clerk. Citizens and community groups who wish to work with municipal government would be wise to learn how to use a council agenda. This is the instrument by which staff ask for the permission they need to move forward, for the policies they require to enact or enforce, and for the resources they will use to fund their plans. Reports from staff are the means by which council knows what is coming up and is able to monitor actions and evaluate outcomes. The agenda is a very powerful document. Knowing how to get your interests or your delegation on the agenda is one of the most important skills a citizen or community group can learn.

Taking a closer look at the agenda, whether of committee of the whole or council, there are some fairly typical divisions. There may be presentations by citizens or community groups who come to inform council of actions in the community. Often this is an opportunity to celebrate or to reward. In communities where the council meetings are televised, this can be used (and sometimes abused) as an opportunity to promote a message or event. Usually, presentations are made by groups who have been invited to speak. If your community group wishes to make a presentation to council, ask the clerk’s office for the details on how you can do that.

Delegations to council are different from presentations and are made with respect to items on the agenda. There is a great deal of variety across the province in how this is carried out. Some councils will hear delegations only if they have registered ahead of time with the clerk’s office. Others will hear anyone who appears. Some councils limit the time that a delegation may speak; others do not. Generally, delegations present information to council that will be useful in their deliberations. Citizens and community groups may question the actions of council but this is not an opportunity for debate, as councillors are limited to asking questions for clarification.

The bulk of the agenda is devoted to reports. The majority of these are from staff but they may also come from boards and committees over a councillor’s or staff member’s signature. They will present a case, usually giving background and financial implications, and will propose a recommended course of action for council’s consideration. It is important to remember that much of the work of staff and council is carried out on boards and in committees. It is there that input is received from citizens, community groups and agencies. Sometimes public meetings or forums are held to gauge opinion and reach consensus. A recommendation that breezes through council may have actually been months in preparation with broad input from the community, and council is comfortable with it.
If you have a request of council, you will probably want it to come forward as a report. To achieve this, work with boards and committees, if that is appropriate, and definitely work with staff and councillors. Get to know city hall and determine who would be best to carry your banner. Which councillors should you work with? That depends. If your concern relates to a geographic area, find out who are the councillors for that area. Most councils divide up the workload, and councillors have portfolios or “chairs.” Is your issue best handled by the Housing chair, the Social Services chair or the councillor in charge of Transportation? Some matters, such as the environment, are often hard to pinpoint to any one staff member, department or councillor. In this case, you will have to determine who has the most personal interest and knowledge about the issue at hand. With some issues, there is little reward for the staff member to take the time — they already have too much work, and they have a tight timetable. You may have to wait until an event or controversy in the broader community makes the issue more pressing. If an issue is of broad public interest, you can always go to the mayor or warden directly.

The next part of the agenda is reserved for correspondence. These items bring information to council, and they usually come from agencies and associations, but they may also be from local citizens and community groups who wish to make a request. This may be an appropriate way to bring forward routine requests (to close the road for the sidewalk sale again this year) or to send a letter of thanks to council. But it may not be the best way unless you know that you have strong support from a majority of councillors. If the request involves money or staff time, it is far better to have the request come to council over a staff signature, with staff support. It is the duty of staff to help citizens and community groups, so you should always consult with staff first rather than go directly to council. Often requests can be satisfied by staff without having to go to council.

All official corporate business is processed through the clerk’s office. Citizens and community groups would be wise to make themselves familiar with the role of this office. It is the clerk’s office that prepares all matters going forward to council and also follows up on the decisions of council. The clerk provides advice to council and staff to ensure that all corporate business is properly dealt with in accordance with Ontario and other applicable laws. The clerk’s office develops and administers municipal policy and processes requests made under Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy for the municipal sector. It administers a variety of statutory duties under the Vital Statistics Act (such as marriage licences) and is responsible for conducting elections. It is through the clerk’s office that you will be added to the council agenda.
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As staff and councillors deal with the daily business of their own municipalities, other important partners are the municipalities next door who may be entering into joint agreements, or other municipalities across the province or the country. Associations such as the Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO) and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) offer many ways for municipal governments to share ideas and work together towards common goals. There are also professional societies for various levels of staff, such as the chief administrative officers (CAOs) and clerk-treasurers.

3.3 (g) The Financial Picture

How do municipalities pay for all the services that they provide? Municipal revenue is derived primarily from property tax. The tax is calculated by multiplying the assessed value of the property by a tax rate set by the municipality. A municipality is able to set different tax rates for different classes of property: residential, multi-residential, commercial and industrial.

The expenditure part of the municipal budget is divided into Capital Works and Operations. Although the bulk of the revenue for municipalities comes from property tax, there are other sources: the Community Re-Investment Fund from the province; development funds from new development and renovations; interest on funds (such as reserve funds); fines and penalties; user fees; licences and permits; alcohol and gaming permits; revenue from casinos; and donations and bequests. Sometimes there are also special provincial or federal grants for capital expenditures. For example, the Ontario Government’s SuperBuild Fund provides multi-year investments in public infrastructure to renew and expand highways, colleges, hospitals, universities, cultural facilities, community centres, long-term-care facilities, hockey arenas and other capital projects (Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing website, accessed January 2003).

Property in Ontario has been assessed for municipal taxation purposes for more than 200 years. Due to unequal assessment practices among municipalities, in 1970 the provincial government standardized property assessment across all Ontario municipalities. Further changes were made in 1998 with the introduction of the Ontario Fair Assessment System (OFAS), under which all properties in Ontario were reassessed at the same time and on the same basis. Each property has a new current value assessment, which is updated regularly. Also, responsibility for property assessment was transferred to a new municipal corporation called the Municipal Property Assessment Corporation (MPAC). MPAC delivers a broad range of assessment services to municipalities, all of which are members of the Corporation.
**Who Does What?**

In 1998 the province implemented a massive reshuffling of service responsibilities and the corresponding funding arrangements. Whereas prior to 1998 the municipality collected property tax on behalf of the school boards, now the provincial government funds education from income tax revenue, and municipalities pay for their new responsibilities with the portion of property tax that formerly went to education, with some transitional adjustments. This was to be a “break even” or “revenue neutral” exercise. Transferred services that are now the responsibility of municipalities include:

- expanded social services
- social housing
- expanded child care
- land ambulance
- expanded public health unit
- funding of assessment office
- seniors’ long-term-care facilities

In some cases two or more municipalities are required by the province to deliver these services jointly, and a “consolidation of service management” is established. Any of the municipalities can be the Service Manager on behalf of others for any of the services.

As a result of the Local Services Alignment, municipalities lost operating and capital grants, transportation subsidies and municipal support grants. Although the province picked up the costs for education and Children’s Aid funding, for many municipalities, this Local Services Realignment was not revenue neutral. The province provided community re-investment funding (CRF) to some municipalities in an effort to “balance” the swap, but would not allow municipalities to establish reserve funds to meet future needs once the temporary CRF funds were exhausted.

The media frequently carries stories on the challenges facing large urban areas; challenges such as affordable housing, property tax increases needed to provide services, and decaying infrastructure. Much less is said about rural areas but it is clear that they are facing similar difficulties in providing services but with far smaller municipal and community financial resources. They do not have the same economies of scale, the same political clout or equal opportunity to bring provincial attention to their problems.

It is clear that municipalities are expected to provide more service with less money than they had before the new process was put in place in 1998. Between 1995 and 2001, municipal government revenues increased 14 per cent while federal and provincial government revenues
increased 38 per cent and 30 per cent, respectively. Raising property tax is not a popular option. There have been calls for municipalities to be granted additional taxation powers, with every increase at the municipal level matched by a corresponding decrease at the provincial and federal levels. This “Quest for a New Deal” is buttressed by current figures. For example, for an average Ontario family that pays a total tax bill of $36,497 (including sales taxes), 59 per cent goes to the federal government, 33 per cent to the province and, after education taxes are deducted, 5 per cent to 6 per cent goes to the local government (Mulvale website, accessed May 2003). According to Federation of Canadian Municipalities president, Jack Layton, “There’s room to move there” (Clugston, 2001).

The new Municipal Act, passed in 2001 and implemented in January 2003, allows municipalities to act in ways quite different from the past in several important areas including land use, economic development and public-private partnerships. Municipalities may partner with urban development corporations to revitalize the downtown core and waterfront or to finance and renew their infrastructure. Some municipalities “outsource” important municipal services “where the private sector can demonstrably do the job better and more efficiently” (Onyschuk, 2002, p. 9).

Municipalities invest, over many years, in key infrastructure services such as sewer and water systems, roads, bridges, transit, and parking garages. Not unlike a person increasing their mortgage on their home to finance a renovation or addition, the municipality has the ability to borrow against these assets; this recognizes the collateral built up and the good financial health of the municipality.

3.3 (h) Governance

We have looked at a good deal of what a municipal government does and we have hardly mentioned council. Does this mean that council is not important? No, it means that council has a very distinct role in the municipal structure. It is a duty of council to think and act strategically. “A council’s primary responsibility is not just to make policy or to do its thumbs up or thumbs down on agenda items at public meetings, it is to determine and achieve the citizens’ desires for the community’s future (Illingworth, 2000).” Unfortunately, some councils become very involved in the day-to-day business of the municipality and do not take the long view.

Competition and political posturing among councillors can get in the way of teamwork. Under the law, councils exist and have authority only when their members convene as bodies to do business. Only when operating as an entity can they exercise authority and fulfill their
purpose. Operating as they do in small groups (many councils have fewer than twelve people), they must have clearly defined roles. Unfortunately, even the roles and responsibilities of the mayor or warden, vis-à-vis the council, are not clear and are more often defined by the performance of the personality in the role than by the function.

The infrastructure of a municipality is all those things that support the economy and its ability to function. Although most people think of infrastructure as hard — roads, bridges, airports, buildings, fibre optic cable and energy generation — soft infrastructure is increasingly seen as just as important. It includes things like functional families, health, education and training systems and the “ability of communities to organize around a common vision of where they want to go” (Jeffery, 1998). In terms of ensuring quality of life, “the soft infrastructure is at least as important as the hard infrastructure, probably more so” (Jeffery, 1998). Several initiatives — Healthy Communities, Green Communities, Peaceful Communities and Communities of Character, to name a few — have helped urban and rural communities to address soft infrastructure capacity building. According to Jeffery, small rural communities have advantages when it comes to soft infrastructure. “A strong sense of community translates into things like more support for families and getting things done cooperatively” (Jeffery, 1998, p. 3).

**Council Process**

Sometimes the council meeting is just a blur. Item after item goes by — moved, seconded, all in favour, hands up, carried — whew! But suddenly an item is debated, discussed, dissected — seemingly forever. What is the difference?

As mentioned earlier, the issues that council considers may come to them as reports from staff (usually with recommendations attached); as letters, reports or presentations from the public (often with requests attached); or they may be initiated by other members of council. An issue may be resolved very quickly if council has experience with the issue (or has background knowledge), if they know the people who are presenting the issue (or are aware of their profile in the community), or if they know that a committee has been dealing with the issue and has reached consensus or that the public has had an opportunity for input. But let a new issue come forward, represented by people who are not known, and the debate may go on and on.

Council has the following options when a recommendation has been moved:

- Vote on the recommendation and support/defeat (straight majority).
- Amend the recommendation, then vote.
- Refer it to staff or to a committee for further consideration.
- Postpone it until some time in the future.
- Vote not to consider it further (it is dead).
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If the issue has come forward without a recommendation, council may decide simply “to receive.” This is the weakest form of response and promises nothing. Council has been informed of the issue but not much more may follow.

If a citizen or a community group wishes to bring an issue to council for support or resolution the following is suggested:

- Work with staff and try to get their support wherever possible.
- Talk to councillors before the meeting and send them information so they understand your issues.
- Try to get “champions” on council who will speak up for you.
- If the issue is not a familiar one, try to enlist the help of people in the community who are well known to councillors.
- Be clear and succinct.

Also, tell council why you are coming before them: What is it you need from them? Are you asking for dollars, in-kind contributions, maps, statistics, a street closure for a day, a proclamation, community funding, a partnership or an endorsement? Often, to get outside funding, you may need to have the municipal council on side. If that is what you need, say so. In some communities, the Healthy Communities Coalition has gone to council seeking a resolution to declare the city “a Healthy Community” (see the sample resolution form in the “Resources” section).

Council does its work through resolutions and by-laws. A resolution is a statement of council’s position on a matter at one point in time. That expressed position can change since resolutions do not carry the weight of law. They provide procedural direction to staff and provide a framework for decision making. By-laws, on the other hand, are the formal instruments through which the authority of the city (as a corporate entity) is exercised. Only those resolutions that are within the area of legislation are read and approved as by-laws. They have the authority of legislation behind them and are enforceable. These may include local board and commission appointments, the issuing of debentures, council procedures, signing authority, licensing, animal control, zoning and agreements of all types (land transactions, easements, development agreements, leases), hiring of senior personnel, and union contracts.
4. Community Planning

Effective planning of human settlements ... will come to depend more on human relations in the process of arriving at decisions than it will on the planner’s science and art of preparing plans.

— Harry Lash, quoted in Hodge, Planning Canadian Communities, p. 366

Communities that are well designed and planned generally offer a higher quality of life for their residents and are better able to attract jobs and investment. Municipalities in Ontario are required to have an Official Plan that outlines the policies on how land within the municipal boundaries is to be used. The municipalities have the major role in planning decisions, but the provincial government must approve the Official Plan and any amendments to it. Municipal Official Plans are primarily concerned with the “built” environment; e.g., where different types of housing, commercial and retail operations and industry may be located. However, many also address environmental protection, economic development, safety and other areas relating to community well-being. The following are some relatively new perspectives that have had an influence on community planning in the last decade:

- The energy-efficient community — looks at ways the physical environment can be altered to conserve energy and reduce the amount of automobile travel.
- The healthy community — promotes a holistic approach to improving community environments to enable people to support each other more effectively and to achieve a better overall quality of life.
- Postmodern suburb — creates variety in design, town centres and social spaces for the enormous and diverse populations living in suburbs.
- New urbanism — creates community values such as neighbourliness through a greater mixture of land uses, mirroring small-town settings and promoting sustainability.
- Bio-regionalism — adopts the perspective of ecological principles; communities and the surrounding environment are seen as integrated elements and are bound together in the “web of life,” including geology, soil, wildlife, water systems and human cultures. (Hodge, p. 186)

Matters of planning may be dealt with by a planning committee made up entirely of councillors or one including citizens. It is responsible for amendments to the Official Plan of the municipality and the zoning by-laws. Each municipality is required to review its Official Plan, and this is perhaps the most important time for citizens to have input on the way physical development will happen within their community. Changes to the Official Plan are to be carried out in a prescribed way under the Planning Act. Often a public meeting is required, along with the circulation of information and opportunities for those opposed and in favour of the application for change to speak to the planning committee. It is important to watch the
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newspapers for notification of changes in your municipality; the notice will explain how and where citizens can submit their comments. Both municipal staff and citizens can experience frustration when citizens or community groups come forward late in the process. Staff may view the citizens as not adhering to the prescribed process; citizens may feel that they did not receive adequate information about how to participate effectively or in enough time to respond appropriately.

Applications for changes to the Official Plan and zoning applications, as well as site plans, are circulated to agencies that may comment on what is proposed. Any organization whose mandate would be affected and whose input would be valuable to municipal staff (for example, historical organizations, natural area advisory groups and trails groups) may try to get on the circulation list. Comments from those agencies and organizations on the circulation list must be addressed. This is a highly effective way of working with staff at the front end of a project. However, there is a great deal of variation among municipalities and community groups as to the resources that are available for this review process, so the theory of what should happen may not always be the same as the actual practice. It is important that all parties play a role in the process.

Planning for a community requires collective decision-making processes, usually within the framework of local government. There are a number of procedures, both formal and informal, that condition the processes of decision making. These involve a wide range of participants whose values, roles and behaviours must be understood. Community planning does not operate independently from either the political arena or the economic marketplace. Reconciling these positions makes community planning a process in social cooperation. (Hodge, p. 365)
5. Promoting Community Participation in Municipal Affairs

The root *demos* in *democracy* stands for people, and many citizens and municipalities are trying to put the people back in the process. At some times in history, all adult members of a community took part in decisions, for example, in town hall meetings. At the municipal level this would be impossible today so representative democracy has evolved with elections once every three or four years. Between elections the democratic aspect of government is to be assured by ready access to elected officials and the “gold fish bowl” atmosphere in which they are supposed to operate.

To some citizens and even some politicians, democracy stops at the ballot box. This is unfortunate because councillors need to understand the views of ratepayers. Are citizens “tuning out” of the usual avenues for democratic expression? Some suggest that voter turnout — holding steady at about 40 per cent — would indicate yes (Tindal, 2001). Given the absence of “the clash and controversy associated with opposing political parties” and the lack of media attention received by local politics, as well as the complexity of the ballot, it is surprising that it remains as high as it does” (Tindal, 2001).

Councils that introduce initiatives to increase public consultation and involvement should be prepared for the fact that, initially at least, the public may be disinterested and suspicious. A council must demonstrate that it sincerely wants and values public input. “Making this effort may do more than revive local democracy, it may also create a much stronger municipality” (Tindal, 2001). Below are some of the many opportunities and strategies for councils, staff and citizens to work together on municipal affairs. They are loosely organized from the least effort or initiative required by the community member, to those requiring substantial investment of time and money.

**Voting**

Providing alternative forms of voting can increase opportunities for citizen engagement. Voting procedure has seen very few changes during the last 100 years. Traditionally, municipalities vote every three years, usually in churches, schools and community halls, with the average cost being $4.50 to $5.50 per eligible voter. Until recently, innovative voting has been limited to extended hours and use of non-traditional venues like shopping malls. Ontario amended the legislation in 1996 to allow municipalities more flexibility. Now, to be more responsive to the demands on people’s lives and to decrease costs, new methods have been implemented.
Telephone voting was first adopted in Gravenhurst in 1997. Each voter received a packet of information and security code numbers — “smart” numbers that knew the ward and the school district the elector was entitled to vote for. The voting period was extended from one to twelve days. Costs were down by 50%, results were much quicker, and the turnout was comparable. However, there were a couple of negative outcomes: Some people missed the social aspect of voting. And in Centre Wellington, many people left their vote to the last moment and telephone lines were jammed; some votes could not be taken.

Voting by mail was first used in 1997 in twenty Ontario municipalities, and has since significantly increased voter turnout — sometimes by as much as double! By the year 2000 election, over seventy municipalities representing 825,000 voters were receiving ballots by mail. Vote by mail was also used for a non-binding referendum on the MegaCity concept in Toronto. Currently, Ontario is the only province with legislation that allows voting by mail. (Canada Post website, accessed May 2003.) There are many advantages to this method. It is intended to increase voter participation (for example, by seasonal residents); remove the barriers that keep people from getting to the polls (it may make it easier for seniors and people with disabilities); and allow people more time to study the issues and candidates. There have also been considerable cost savings with this process — costs for facility rental, advance polls, staff and administration are decreased. There are some potential disadvantages too. Since ballots are cast over a longer period of time, some people may vote before hearing all the arguments on the issues. And although voting from home is private, it is open to influence from others in a way that voting at a booth is not.

Digital technology, especially voting online, has the potential to keep citizens informed and to obtain quick responses to issues. However, access to technology is not sufficiently high for electronic voting in elections to be considered, and the security measures required may seem an invasion of privacy to some.

Open Forum at Council

Some cities have a time prior to a council meeting when citizens can appear as a delegation, without registering, to express their concerns, ask questions or make a request of council.

Expert Opinion

There is a tremendous amount of expertise in a community: The trick is to harness it. In one eastern Ontario city, a man approached the workers installing a new sundial in the city zoo. This man was an expert on sundials, and he pointed out that the sundial they were installing
would only be accurate in Tennessee! The sundial was replaced. Often the key to getting people involved is to simply invite them to participate and listen to what they have to say. This is the motto of the mayor of New Glasgow, Nova Scotia. She recently received an e-mail from a grade 7 student who commented on how the city’s skateboard park should be run. Within twenty-four hours the mayor had set up a meeting between the young girl and the town’s recreation department so she could share her expertise.

**Reports**

When dealing with city hall, citizens and community groups will often need an update on the status of an issue. When the information does not appear to be forthcoming as a report on the council agenda, they may ask a councillor to request a report from staff. Sometimes this is done as an item under new business on council’s agenda and a staff member or other councillor may give the report verbally at that time. The group should make a note of what has been said and by whom so it can serve as part of the record on the issue.

**Letters/Phone Calls/E-mails/Faxes/Meetings with Councillors**

People who know councillors well are shocked at the number of pieces of information that comes their way. In many municipalities it would be physically impossible to reply to them all — especially in those municipalities where the councillor position is part time and they often have a full-time job as well. How you communicate with a councillor very much depends on your access to technology and skill levels, as well as the councillor’s preferences for face-to-face, voice or print contact. If the issue is complex and time is of the essence a short meeting might work best, particularly if there are a number of people involved. Sometimes a councillor receives too many phone calls to return them all at a reasonable time of day. Sending e-mail has the advantage that you can explain fully what your issue or question is and the councillor can reply at whenever time is convenient to them and, often, from wherever they happen to be — even out of town. Letters and faxes tend to be more formal but will often have to be answered more informally with a telephone call. It is very much appreciated by a councillor if the group organizes a phone tree or some internal form of communication. That way the councillor doesn’t have to update a whole group of people.

It is important to know when to contact a councillor. For most issues they are not the first resort. At the municipal building or city hall there are many opportunities to have your questions answered, your concerns known or your problems solved. Staff are paid from taxes and are there to work with citizens. True, many staff are very busy with the added off-loaded services, but they are the people who have the answers. In many municipalities you can find
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the information you are looking for online at the municipality’s website. If you mire councillors down with minor issues that the staff could attend to, the councillors will not be able to lift their glance to the broader view that is so important to the long-term viability of the community. Most councillors are very happy to have citizens and community groups share their vision for the community, whether those concepts are economic, environmental or social.

Online Communication

E-government — Information technologies now allow individuals to participate in discussions and decision making without time and space limitations. This has the potential to change the whole culture of public participation. One interesting example is a planning process in Fredericton in which there was two-way online communication between decision makers and the public. Citizens were informed, in real time, about changes in the proposed plan and about schedules of events related to the plan such as public meetings and hearings. As a result, the planning process was successful in facilitating consensus at meetings by quickly disseminating information to and receiving information from various stakeholders in the community. This method of communication allowed even those who were hesitant to speak in public to have a say.

Municipal websites, with information running the gamut from current events to minutes of the latest council meeting, are becoming more common as are customer service centres where a variety of services can be provided online. These may include paying bills and fines like taxes and parking tickets, making reservations for sports events, even renewing books at the library. Much has been said about the disadvantage to the democratic process of turning citizens into customers: Information technology “is going to alter the balance in the relationship between a citizen and government. We all aspire to a more citizen-centric view of the world and I think even government will state that as its ultimate objective” (Douglass, 2001).

Conflict Resolution

Conflict resolution (also known as alternative dispute resolution) is a process that occurs in different ways throughout the democratic process. Whenever two or more people come together, conflicting perspectives are possible. The underlying principles of co-operative democracy are the recognition and the healthy resolution of such differing perspectives.

Municipalities are sometimes faced with disputes between neighbours or competing community interests. If the dispute becomes multi-faceted and just doesn’t go away, it is probably best solved by mediation. Some cities have established an alternative dispute resolution committee that deals with disputes referred to it by the city or the police. All services are voluntary and are conducted by trained mediators.
Conflict occurs when there are differing perspectives, needs, interests and/or ideas about various solutions. They may arise out of differences in method and procedure, the need to share scarce resources, insufficient information and breakdowns in communication. When the conflict is between citizens and city hall, it is important that an identified process is in place to help minimize the frustrations for people trying to reach a constructive and co-operative outcome. City staff, accustomed to adversarial negotiations, will sometimes “throw a standard or policy at you and think that should cut it” (Hughes, 2001). Community groups may use the DAD principle — Decide, Announce and Defend — which can imply, “We know what’s best” (Bernius, 2001). A conflict resolution process creates consensus among parties rather than imposing an outcome. “It encourages opponents to back off polar positions and instead express their hopes, fears, priorities and expectations that form the basis of conflict” (Bernius, 2001). It also shares the responsibility for the search for consensus.

**Ratepayer Groups/Community Associations**

These groups and associations come in all shapes and sizes, including a playground committee, a whole street, or a neighbourhood. Because they tend to be geographic, it is important to organize a group that is large enough to be heard but not so large that communication among its members is difficult. These groups will implode quickly if members are out of touch and begin to work at cross-purposes. From council’s point of view, there may be questions about the representativeness of the citizen group and the extent to which it can speak for the group as a whole that it claims to represent. Previously, ratepayer groups tended to be property owners looking after their property-related issues. Now, they have evolved into neighbourhood associations or community councils that include both owners and tenants and have a broader perspective.
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Another major concern of council members is that some citizens’ groups will ignore an unfolding issue until the final stages and then make a last-minute effort to reverse a decision already made by council (Illingworth, 2000). On the other hand, citizens may feel that the timelines for commenting are too short, or perhaps the issues are too complex to be readily digested by many community members. And it is important to remember that councillors are responsible to all citizens on all issues, so they may not agree with the neighbourhood associations when they speak only for their members and on specific issues of concern to that neighbourhood. According to Illingworth (2000), “Elected councillors are representatives, not delegates.”

Petitions

When a neighbour appears at your door with a petition, it is very hard to say no. Councils know this and therefore petitions are not as strong a voice of the people as they might appear. Make sure that any question on a petition is clear and neutral. Strengthen your petition by including only those people who are living in the area affected by the problem, and ask people to print their name legibly as well as sign it. Addresses should also be given. It is best to include only those of voting age. Remember to translate the petition into languages that are used in your neighbourhood.

Clearly identify the problem and the desired outcomes, but not the specific means to achieve it. For example, instead of saying, “We want a stop sign at the end of the street,” identify the problem — “Cars are travelling far too fast on our street” — and the general outcome that you are hoping to achieve — “and we want them slowed down.” That way, if the situation doesn’t warrant a stop sign, the staff will explore other options to solve your problem, such as installing speed bumps.

Participatory Budgeting

This is a good way to further democratize the decision-making processes related to the planning, development and implementation of the annual budget. The method of accomplishing participatory budgeting depends on the community, but typically it involves the following: open discussions of the issues or problems identified by different neighbourhoods; the standardization of criteria for the use of the budget; the ranking of priorities for the municipality and the citizens; and a process to ensure that those who are typically under-represented or marginalized from such decision-making processes are provided greater access.
Community Input Assessment Tool

This is a tool that can be used by community groups and municipalities to measure community participation on five dimensions: leadership, organization, needs assessment, management and resource mobilization. A narrow ranking suggests community-base leadership representing only the wealthy minority acting in their own interest or outside expertise being imposed on a community, usually with a pre-existing agenda. A broad measure of participation would include a variety of constituencies in the community with leadership representation and voice acting effectively on behalf of community concerns and priorities. (See www.econ.state.or.us/readintro.htm for an assessment tool created by the Oregon Economic and Community Development Department to measure readiness for community and economic development. It determines areas where there is a need to build capacity.)

Community Forums

Creating a place that promotes public dialogue and encourages active citizen participation can be accomplished in a variety of ways and could include an interactive website, a one-off community meeting, or a full-fledged agency to drive a community development process. Community forums have several advantages: They can help a community identify needs by bringing agencies and grassroots groups together, can develop coordinated solutions by bringing all the players into one space, and may identify champions in the process. They work best with a consensus-building model that can be used to find innovative solutions even with limited community resources. Community forums should be promoted as widely as possible — so all community members feel they have an equal ability to enter the dialogue — and barriers to participation should be removed as much as possible. They also need expert facilitation so that everyone’s opinion can be heard, not just those of the more aggressive participants.

Open Houses

When an issue is complex or parties to the issue have different interests, an open house is one effective means to get information out to the public and to get their response. Poster boards all around the room may show the various aspects of a new transportation plan, new routes and schedules for transit or the design of a new housing development. A computer PowerPoint presentation may be running in one corner while staff and/or consultants are in another talking face to face with the public, answering their questions and getting their input. Often there is a survey to fill out or an opportunity to vote for one design over another. An open house format is very amenable to the schedules of today’s busy families. Often they will go on for several hours with afternoon and evening times available. One element that is miss-
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ing from an open house is the community-building aspect that an open meeting can produce. You do not hear the arguments of those for and against and have a chance to weigh them for yourself. There is less opportunity for consensus building. Often there is reaction only to what is presented instead of the generation of new ideas or the resolution of differing points of view. There is not the chance for problem solving that a public meeting can produce.

Kitchen Table Talks/Coffee Circles

Meeting around your neighbour’s kitchen table is a good way to bring together a diverse selection of community members in an informal, relaxed setting. These types of meetings are more attractive to people who do not usually attend formal meetings and may encourage them to continue their involvement. It is a good way to minimize the power differences in community discussions. Often “kitchen meetings” are organized by blocks in urban areas or by concessions in rural areas. If these meetings are part of a larger initiative, a central coordinating committee may be established to collate information from a number of individual groups and look for common themes. In some cases an interim report is sent back out to the groups for comment. In this way — back and forth — a consensus document is produced with most people not having to leave their home area and without the disparities in power and comfort that a larger meeting might emphasize.

Community Meetings

A “public meeting” has a special meaning under the Planning Act to discuss planning and land-use matters. There are many times, though, when councillors or staff may want to bring together a group of people affected by a decision to gather their input. These community meetings are not as structured as a ratepayer or neighbourhood association meeting, and they usually consist of one or two meetings for discussion and input. They may concern, for example, the siting of a group home in the neighbourhood, the set-up of a recycling facility, the design of a new playground, or a change in parking regulations. Decisions are not binding on either the councillors and staff or the neighbourhood attendees.

Candidates Meetings

Many community organizations host candidates meetings before a municipal election, in which the candidates that are running for office, either for the whole municipality or perhaps just in a particular ward, are invited to participate in a community meeting. Often they will form a panel where each candidate will be invited to speak for a few minutes, and this will be followed by a question-and-answer session with the community members. One strategy used
by some groups is to provide questions ahead of time to candidates relating to particular concerns, giving the candidates a longer opportunity to think about their answers, and thus providing the audience with a chance to assess their responses fairly. A variation on this strategy is to go one step further and provide information sheets on critical issues to the candidates as a means of both educating the candidates in advance and hopefully the audience as well during the questioning period. Candidates meetings, held in an easily accessible neighbourhood location and well advertised, are an excellent means of generating interest in local politics and ensuring that candidates are in touch with the needs and interests of their potential constituents.

**Vision Forums**

Bringing citizens into the decision-making process early can help build co-operation. Some cities hold vision forums to find out where citizens see their city or town going and what actions they feel need to be taken. In Atlanta, Georgia, a vision forum was kicked off by a tour of the city. Councillors thought this was a good way to “have fresh eyes on what we are doing” (Georgia Municipal Association website, accessed April 2003). A vision forum is not a gripe session but rather a chance for all to be heard by council and staff. The information from all the vision groups is organized and then — an important step — it is brought back to the people for ratification. Then the action can begin.

**Healing Circles**

This method comes from the Aboriginal community. A gathering of eight to twelve people who like and respect each other meets at a comfortable sheltering place. Food is shared, and people work in a circle, all members being equal. Each person first shares thoughts, feelings and experiences that brought them to the healing circle and, at the end, their views about the discussion. Common themes and experiences can form the focus for discussion. For example, What is power? Who has it? How can we take back some of that power for ourselves and our communities? All decisions made by the healing circle must be arrived at by consensus and through courtesy and kindness to all members. Afterwards, absolute confidentiality must be respected (Edwards, 1994).

**Round Tables**

Round tables are part of the growing movement to find alternatives to adversarial forms of dispute resolution and decision making. They bring together representatives of all interests in the community. Because they are non-hierarchical and are based on co-operative principles,
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decisions are made by consensus. Freed from vertically organized bureaucratic structures, round tables have been able to study issues and make recommendations “that cut across traditional lines, breaking out of the jurisdictional gridlock that currently pervades the political system” (Doering, 1993). A round table can act as a catalyst to stimulate new, creative ways of thinking about problems, especially those tied up in red tape. Members of the round table can bridge old rivalries and get beyond the misperceptions that blocked collaboration in the past.

Group Planning Sessions

This method comes out of the study group concept and can be used for something as small as locating a children’s splash pad to something as big as the strategic plan of a community. The impetus may come from the municipality, a public or non-profit organization or agency, or even a community group. A place to begin is to create an asset map — a list of all the stakeholders in community-building throughout the area. They might include churches, school groups, parent-teacher associations, neighbourhood groups, service clubs, cultural groups, chambers of commerce, or business improvement groups. All are asked for participants, who come together in small groups to address questions such as, What are the community’s strengths and weaknesses? What do we want the future to look like? What action steps can we take to accomplish these goals? What can we do as individuals? What can we do as a municipal government?

From all these responses the group seeks the common elements and proposes an action plan, which is usually presented to the municipal council for endorsement. There are several benefits to the group planning approach. First, the municipality ends up with a current list of all the groups and organizations in the community. Second, groups and people get to know each other. This fosters positive feelings among the community members. But, most important, the council and staff are able to move forward on a strategic plan that is much more focused and satisfying.

In Duluth, Minnesota, council came up with a very innovative way to bring the public into a plan to expand the downtown area. They put on their aprons and cooked breakfast and lunch for anyone who would come and give their input. They also provided childcare for those who needed it. The participants were divided into five groups and each was assigned to come up with a proposal for expanding the downtown area. Consultants hired by the city looked over the plans for common elements and incorporated those into the proposal to the city, thus demonstrating that what a citizen says can make a difference.
Surveys

A survey can be a dangerous thing! A simple count survey is straightforward enough: How many children have had breakfast before coming to school? How many restaurants are posted as smoke-free? But opinion surveys are a different matter. The wording of the questions and the analysis of results require expert consultation, and the results have to be interpreted so that the general public will understand the implications of those results. A cardinal rule of surveys is to ensure the sample of people you survey is representative of the population you want to talk about. For example, if you survey only those people who come into a recreation centre on Tuesday morning, you can’t talk about all the people who use that recreation centre — the conclusions can only be applied to the Tuesday morning users. Keeping these comments in mind will help a group develop and analyze a survey in a way that will be useful for their purposes.

Run for Elected Office

How do you identify people who would make good councillors? And how do you get them to run? One small American city came up with the idea of “Council Member of the Month.” The mayor and councillors take turns, in alphabetical order, naming someone in the community as “Council Member of the Month,” or an honorary councillor. That person is taken on a tour of the city operations, attends all council and committee meetings, and receives the agenda and board information (except caucus) at the same time as council. Many of the current council members were once honorary councillors, so this method does work to get more people interested in running. It is also educational for the broader community as the honorary councillor will pass the information and experience gained to others in his or her network.

Fewer citizens will be available to run for council as the increased workload changes the nature of council service. The part-time community volunteer is increasingly being replaced by the full-time professional politician — someone who has to spend a lot of time focused on getting re-elected in what has now become an ongoing career. This is one of the most significant impacts of the post-amalgamation municipal world (Tindal, 2001).

If you would like to run for municipal office in Ontario, here are some things to know.

- Anyone who is eligible to vote may run for public office.
- You must be 18 years old or older.
- You must be a Canadian citizen.
- You must be a resident of the municipality or a property owner or tenant or spouse or same-sex partner of a person who is an owner or tenant.
- You must satisfy the above conditions for a specified period just before the election.
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- You need to contact the clerk of the municipality at least a few months before the election; this person has authority over the election.
- Election day is the second Monday in November.
- It is most important that a person not start campaigning, and certainly not accept any donations towards a campaign, before being registered as a candidate.
- More information about running for municipal election can be obtained though your city clerk’s office.

A profile of Canadian mayors concluded that, on the whole, the typical big-city mayor is middle aged, male, university-educated with a business background, previously experienced as a city councillor and has a Conservative political affiliation, if any. Although local government is considered to be highly accessible to women, in 1997 in Ontario, women constituted only 22 per cent of councillors (Kushner and Stanwick, 2002).
6. Working Together

Since the mid-eighties, when the Healthy Communities movement started in Ontario, municipal governments have played an important role in its development. Many local governments provide support to local and regional Healthy Community coalitions in terms of cash, staff assistance and/or in-kind donations of services or facilities. Several municipalities have established an interdepartmental committee to explore ways in which the work conducted by the different departments can be complementary and the staff can work together across different disciplines to strengthen the community. More than thirty-eight municipalities in Ontario have passed resolutions supporting or adopting Healthy Community principles. In most cases this has been followed up by tangible work undertaken by a Healthy Community coalition, involving municipal staff, politicians, and community agencies and local citizens. For a sample of a Healthy Communities resolution, see the “Resources” section.

In Sudbury, council adopted the Healthy Communities model as a strategic priority. Community stakeholders, city staff and a city councillor worked together to create and implement a framework. Council realized that access to quality health care services is only one ingredient needed to improve the health status of the population. Many aspects of a community need to come together to support and improve health. These are all being addressed in Sudbury’s Healthy Community strategy, including access to education, affordable, high-quality food, employment opportunities, sports, leisure, and socializing.

The Woolwich Healthy Communities Coordinating Committee (WHCCC) was formed in 1991 to promote the Healthy Communities concept and develop community initiatives. Members included interested citizens, local politicians, municipal staff, and people representing education, business, health and social services. Woolwich Township Council subsequently endorsed the Healthy Communities concept and directed that council and staff representatives work with WHCCC on the formation of Healthy Community guiding principles. Subgroups were formed and continue to be active, addressing a wide range of issues that are of concern to the people of Woolwich Township. (For more information on Woolwich Healthy Communities, see www.grandconnections.com/woolwich.)

Sudbury and Woolwich are just two examples of where municipal governments and community members have joined together, finding their common ground as people who care about their community and have the energy and enthusiasm to make their vision a reality — or at least to start the process, knowing that others will follow in their footsteps. We need to engage all community members, including our youth and our children, in creating a community that will nurture all of us.
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For more stories about Healthy Community activities, visit the Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition website at www.healthycommunities.on.ca, where a number of community stories are posted and updated on a regular basis.
Healthy Community Resolutions

The support and involvement of local government in a Healthy Community initiative is essential to its success. The Healthy Communities approach calls for a collaborative relationship between government, community members and other organizations to work together to increase the well-being of all residents. Decisions about urban planning, waste management, emergency and protection services, public health, transportation, parks, recreation facilities and many other areas that impact on health are made at the local level. The involvement of local government is essential to the development of healthy public policy.

One of the mechanisms that some communities have used to confirm local government commitment is the adoption of a municipal resolution supporting a Healthy Community initiative. The commitment may include funding or it may be to actively participate in the initiative and, perhaps, enhance the efforts through staff support and other in-kind donations of goods, services and/or facilities (see overleaf).
Sample Municipal Resolution

Name of Municipality:________________________________________

Date:______________________________________________________

Moved By:______________________________________________________

Seconded By:______________________________________________________

WHEREAS the Municipality of ______________________________ is committed to helping all its residents attain an optimal quality of life; and

WHEREAS the overall health status of the population is determined by such broad social variables as income, education, housing, transportation, security, and environment; and

WHEREAS the Municipality of ______________________________ can influence the determinants of a healthy community by:

- adopting a broad public policy approach to health which examines how overall municipal policies can affect the health of the community,
- encouraging individual civic departments to work individually and collaboratively to establish policies and procedures which promote health in the broadest sense,
- ensuring full community participation in municipal decisions that affect health,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED THAT the Municipality of ______________________________ supports the Healthy Community approach and adopts and promotes within its area of competency, public policies and strategies that enhance the overall health status of its population.
Other Resources

For an excellent overview of municipal structures, roles, services and planning in French, see R. Lechance and M. Morisset, *L’Obsession du citoyen: vade-mecum pour villes et villages où il fait bon vivre*.

*Municipal World* is the oldest continuously published monthly municipal magazine in the world. Founded in 1891, the magazine is devoted to promoting effective municipal government. Their website features important information about local government, details about *Municipal World*’s products and services, and links to other local government resources. See www.municipalworld.com.

The *Federation of Urban Neighbourhoods of Ontario* (FUN) is an umbrella group of community associations throughout Ontario. Founded in November 2001, community associations from Ottawa, Toronto, Hamilton, Guelph and London are charter members of this fledgling organization. The objectives of FUN are to promote awareness of urban issues, undertake projects which will enhance quality of life for residents of urban settings, establish a resource base for information, share expertise, represent the common interests of member organizations before public and private bodies as well as encourage citizens to actively participate in and become informed about community and civic affairs. For more information, see www.ul.london.on.ca/fun.

The *Association of Municipalities of Ontario* (AMO) works with and for municipal governments. AMO’s traditional activities include intergovernment relations and policy development; and information gathering and disseminating on all issues affecting municipalities. See www.amo.on.ca.

The AMO Resource Centre produces and maintains the *Ontario Municipal Home Pages*, which is the most complete list of Ontario municipal sites anywhere on the Internet. Not all of the listed sites have been created or endorsed by municipal governments. See http://199.202.235.157/ylg/ontario.html.

The *Ontario Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing* has six major areas of responsibility: local government, Smart Growth, land-use planning, housing market, building regulation and rural development. Their website contains a great deal of information about municipal affairs. See www.mah.gov.on.ca/scripts/index_.asp.
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The Federation of Canadian Municipalities is the national voice of municipal governments, dedicated to improving the quality of life in all Canadian municipalities. Their website contains information about current issues and projects that their members are dealing with. See www.fcm.ca.

The Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition provides educational resources and community animation services to assist communities and local governments to work together effectively. One manual that you may find useful is From the Ground Up: An Organizing Handbook for Healthy Communities, which contains information and tips on organizing a community group, creating partnerships and taking action to improve the well-being of your community. For information, see www.healthycommunities.on.ca.


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