

Citizen Panel Backgrounder

January 2009

The intent

Edmonton City Council has directed Administration to partner with the University of Alberta on a pilot project to demonstrate the use of a Citizens' Panel in obtaining public input into the City's planning and budgeting processes. The pilot is a result of a Council request to explore participatory democracy to improve the process to expedite community consultation.

The objective of the Citizen Panel pilot is to gain *informed citizen opinion* for Council to seriously consider in the development of the long-term budget.

The Citizen Panel recommendations will be considered by Council as input into the 2010-2011 City of Edmonton budget process. This pilot extends the City's commitment to involving citizens in the decisions that affect them. All citizens are affected by long-term budget priorities.

At the end of the pilot, all stakeholders – City Council, panel members, citizens and Administration -- will assess the Citizen Panel process to determine if this is a repeatable process to gain informed public opinion into city decision making.

The discussion

Panel members will be provided the City Vision, Strategic Plan and an Issue Book. These background materials will set a shared context for informed discussion. A skilled facilitator will host each of the panel's six meetings.

When the Citizen Panel meets their discussions will:

- 1) Benefit from the exchange of diverse opinions and experiences expressed by the panel members who have diverse backgrounds, ages and experiences.
- 2) Initially explore concrete issues (such as which programs or services may need/deserve the most funding).
- 3) Evolve their discussions into the broader, underlying values these Edmontonians share when it comes to shaping the city they envision.
- 4) Develop recommendations about what they believe Edmonton's service priorities should be and how we use our collective resources to achieve our city's vision.

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What's different?

The process and structure of the Citizen Panel, including the planning stage involving administrators and others, is designed to accommodate mixed and opposing views. Based on the experience in other jurisdictions, those involved in planning or observing the Citizen Panel should be prepared throughout the project to acknowledge and respond to moments of apparent uncertainty and ambiguity. This is the "messiness" from which learning can take place.

The University of Alberta will lead the selection and recruitment of up to 50 panel members representing the diversity of Edmontonians. Panelists will be of varying ages, backgrounds, and income levels and represent new and long-time Edmonton residents.

Panel members are citizens at large, don't represent any particular interest group, are not the usual folks or groups who are the vocal minority in City decision-making.

Panel members will have time to explore and discuss the values that underpin opinions and decisions. These values are likely to give a broad directional guidance to the recommendations they develop.

Surveys and polls capture opinion but not necessarily the common or diverse values that are the foundation for that opinion.

Why now?

Citizen Panels are increasingly being used in other jurisdictions as a means of rekindling citizen involvement.

Voter turnouts are at an all time low. Throughout North America citizenship is being eclipsed by consumerism. Taxpayers are looking at the direct exchange between what they pay for and what they get. This view leads to a clash of individual values unweighted by a clearly articulated community value created by ordinary citizens. This is what the Citizen Panel pilot offers.

Civic governments must meet the broad needs of its citizens. Citizen Panels are proving to be a way of delving beyond the tax dollars-for-services conversations to a deeper, shared understanding of the values citizens hold.

The Citizen Panel builds on the success of the City of Edmonton's Visioning exercise and is a new public involvement methodology for the City of Edmonton.

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Timelines

September 2008

City Council directs Administration to partner with the University of Alberta to demonstrate the use of a Citizens' Panel in obtaining public input into the City's planning and budgeting processes.

The pilot is a result of a Council request to explore participatory democracy to improve the process to expedite community consultation.

December 2008

Issue Book produced

January 2009

City Council briefing on Citizen Panel process
Panel members recruited
Pre-survey mailed to 5000 Edmontonians

February 2009

Citizen Panel selection announced

February 21, 2009

Session one of Citizen Panel

Citizen Panel meets to learn about City strategic goals and how they link to the City Vision

Discussion begins about city investment of resources in achieving strategic goals

March 7, 2009

Session two of Citizen Panel

Citizen Panel reflects on information and discusses three perspectives

March 14, 2009

Session three of Citizen Panel

Citizen Panel may ask for subject matter experts to address certain issues or perspectives

Preparation to meet and consult with City Council to further add to issues understanding

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March 21, 2009

Session four of Citizen Panel

Recommendations drafting begins

March 28, 2009

Session five of Citizen Panel

Recommendations drafting continues with goal of further consultation with City Council and Edmontonians

April 25, 2009

Citizen Panel recommendations finalized

June 2009

Final recommendations to City Council
Post Survey mailed to 5000 additional
Edmontonians

November – December 2009

Report back to Panel/Public how City Council
used or not used the Panel recommendations
with rationale on both counts

January 2010

Debriefing process with Panel, Council, SMT

April 2010

Evaluation completed and Budget Office
determines if the process with whatever
refinements are required will be used as
repeatable Public Involvement Process for the
2012 budget cycle