

**Community Engagement and Public Consultation  
through an Inclusive and Participatory Design**

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## **Abstract**

Public participation is designed to increase civic participation and engagement in local governance. The planning process has been increasingly participatory and collaborative in recent years; however, it has not been the most inclusive and equitable process. Planners and local councillors play a significant role in promoting and creating spaces for engagement and participation with vulnerable and marginalized populations. This research examines the City of Toronto's outreach and engagement methods and tools that engage with the public and analyzes design and implementation through a case study, TOcore: Planning Downtown.

The City of Toronto is one of the most diverse and multicultural cities in the world. As a result, their community engagement and public consultation must be equitable and inclusive of historically excluded and seldom heard in the planning process. A review of methods and programs of the City of Toronto was conducted, followed by six semi-structured interviews, and finally, scans of scholarly articles were employed. The research also provided an alternative lens to community building and engagement through a case study in San Francisco. The research analysis suggests an equitable and trauma-informed community building be incorporated and integrated within the engagement process.

**Keywords:** public consultation, community engagement, trauma-informed community building, inclusive participatory planning and collaboration.

## Foreword

This major paper is a reflection of my MES Degree and Plan of Study. My area of concentration is *Planning Inclusive Communities through Equitable and Participatory Design*. The components of my area of concentration are urban planning, urban design, and community development planning. Through my major research, I completed my MES program's learning objectives and strategies set out at the beginning of my study. In my research paper, I fulfill the MES program's requirements, specializing in the Planning stream through the skills, knowledge, and competencies I have gained over the last year.

These learning strategies guided me to propose my research around community engagement and public consultation. In my research, I answer three questions: Are the current outreach and engagement methods providing an inclusive and collaborative engagement process? Can a trauma-informed community building model be used as a best practice for the City of Toronto's engagement process? Finally, what are some strengths and challenges of public consultation in the planning process viewed by planners and councillors?

Finally, this major paper has given me the knowledge and skills to satisfy the entry requirements of the Ontario Professional Planners Institute for candidate membership.

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## 1. Introduction

According to the 2016 Census of Population Demographics, Toronto's population was approximately 2,731,570 and 52% of the population belonged to a racialized group (or visible minority in the census language) (T.O. Health Check). This figure represents a substantial increase of 47% from the 2006 Census. In a city like Toronto, one of the most diverse cities in the world, the motto "Diversity, our Strength" carries a heavyweight especially working to serve and protect the residents of the city. However, with diversity comes challenges like many cities around the world to provide equitable and inclusive approaches to city building and community development. The City of Toronto serves a population with diverse backgrounds, religions, cultures and histories where people around the world come here to start a new chapter in their life.

My major paper research examines local governance in community development and planning. It focuses on how local governance is imagined in theory and how it is practiced in cities through engagement methods and approaches. Local governance can also be used interchangeably with social governance, participatory governance and network governance. These terms are also related to community governance, community participation, engagement and decision making in public matters in neighbourhoods. Physical, cultural, economic and social changes and transformations of neighbourhoods can dramatically impact the lives of city dwellers. With such change, community members and residents must be informed and engaged in the process to influence decision-making within their neighbourhood. However, being engaged in a process within a project is not equivalent to having a voice or decision power. It is important to assess how projects are identified, studied and implemented within communities.

When discussing community governance, it is key to address the voices of community members and best represent their needs. This demand raises two important questions: Who is qualified to represent a community? Whose voices are speaking and heard over others? During community engagement processes, there are times when the project consults what is referred to as an "Advisory Committee" in the development

of a project to gain community feedback. From an equitable planning standpoint, we must ensure voices of marginalized and equity-seeking individuals and groups are represented in these committees.

This MES Major Research aims to understand how community engagement and public consultation in the City of Toronto is practiced by planners and the city councillors by examining current methods, programs and approaches. The paper also suggests the trauma-informed community building model as a best practice and holistic approach for community engagement with communities who experience trauma, violence, poverty and lack of trust in institutions.

This paper explores the gaps between the design and implementation of outreach and engagement approaches by answering three research questions:

- Are the current outreach and engagement methods providing for an inclusive and collaborative engagement process?
- Can trauma-informed community building model be used as a best practice for the City of Toronto's engagement process?
- What are some strengths and challenges of public consultation in the planning process viewed by planners and councillors?

## **Roadmap of the Paper**

This paper is organized in eight sections. The first section introduces the major research project, outlining the research objectives and discussing the significance of the research. The second section presents methods used for this research and provides details of the changes in methods and research project. The third section provides a background on literature pertaining to planning concepts and public participation and exploring the different models of planning throughout history. It discusses the planning profession and the debates, neighbourhood governance and the new idea of co-production in participatory planning.

Section 4 examines the existing outreach and engagement methods and approaches currently employed by the City of Toronto. The section also explores the role of residents and the question of "Do residents need to be educated?" to participate

in the planning process. Section 5 follows with a case study on one of City's projects titled TOcore: Planning Downtown where city staff employed various methods of outreach and engagement to plan for Downtown core focusing a variety of goals and principles. Section 6 offers a best practice example from San Francisco where BRIDGE housing corporation and University of San Francisco conducted research with the trauma-informed community building model to investigate how community organizers and planners can integrate this into their engagement models. The concluding section presents a summary of this paper and also outlines the limitations and challenges of the research and future directions or next steps for this research topic.

## **2. Methodology**

The objective of my research paper is to examine the discrepancies in governance ideology and practice in the planning field through public engagement strategies and consultation processes. To assess community governance in practice, the research provides a list of the current outreach and engagement programs and methods in the City of Toronto and examines the gaps in design and implementation. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two councillors and four planners from the City of Toronto to better understand the engagement and planning process pre-and during COVID-19. Scholarly articles and case studies were used to support inclusive and collaborative community engagement practices and provide a best practice with regards to equitable and diverse engagement in Toronto.

In the proposal for this research, the research objectives were to assess and examine community governance and engagement in practice in two case studies in Toronto; a neighbourhood identified as low-income and another in a middle-class neighbourhood. The purpose of the research was to investigate challenges, barriers, disparities, and marginalization lower-income neighbourhoods face when asserting citizenship and governance. However, due to ethics and the fact that most low-income neighbourhoods are over-researched and underrepresented in decision-making, it was decided to shift gears towards inclusive and collaborative engagement methods and approaches in the City of Toronto and best practices from another city. The



communities were selected based on well-known barriers to engagement and participation in the community. These barriers are single-parent households, settlement history and immigration status, and lastly, the type of job of individuals in the community. These are clear indicators that can highlight the challenges of residents and community members who are unable to participate in the engagement process.

A total of six interviews were conducted from January 2021 to March 2021. The interviews were scheduled with planners and councillors who worked and represented in those neighbourhoods and others were chosen through the snow-balling effect from previous interviews. The interviews were semi-structured and both planners and councillors were asked similar questions around the goals and objectives of the ward/project/study, initiatives and methods of engagement, interactions they may have had with communities and any insight on the planning and engagement process in the City of Toronto. Interviews lasted 30 minutes to an hour, and were recorded with permission of the interviewee -- with the exception of one interviewee who wished not to be recorded. Interviewees were given the opportunity to remain or not be anonymous and will be referred to as Planner #1, #2, #3, #4 and Councillor #1 and #2.

Grey literature (planning reports and studies and published reports) was reviewed. The City of Toronto's website was used to collect information and data on a specific project "TOcore: Planning Downtown" and other relevant documents were used to provide a record of the City's engagement methods and approaches. Reports from Amnesty International, University of Windsor and case study reports from BRIDGE Housing Corporation and the Health Equity Institute at San Francisco State University were also reviewed. In addition, scholarly articles were employed to speak on matters such as the role of citizens and the scope of influence that participants have in decision-making. Peer-reviewed articles provide a theoretical framework in the planning field and the idea of 'expert' or 'scientific' knowledge and laypeople's knowledge. Academic literature provided a theoretical background to contrast empirical findings of interviews and grey literature more focused on approaches and implementation.

### 3. Literature Review

Public participation and public engagement in planning is relatively recent. Early planning models for the idealized or utopian city, such as Ebenezer Howard's (1898) Garden City, rely on a high degree of control where public intervention was not accounted for and did not suggest the requirement of any opinion from anyone who was not considered an 'expert' in that field. The development of a plan was very much the sole work of the planner. This dominant approach of the planning concept did not believe in decentralized political systems and local governance until the 1950s. Synoptic planning in the United States and the United Kingdom emerged as an approach of systems planning to involve public participation for the first time. However, based on "the goals of planning are essentially universally shared and transcend any special sectional interest" (Kiernan 1983, p. 77), the idea that society is homogenous framed participation as a way to simply confirm planning objectives (Lane 2005).

In the 1960s, participation in the planning field emerged with 'advocacy planning' and 'equity planning' following civil rights movements when individuals mobilized to bring change into the systems (Jennings 2004). Lane (2005, p. 293) argues that advocacy planning was built on: "(1) the inequality of bargaining power between groups; (2)... unequal access to the political structure; and (3)... large numbers of people who are unorganized and therefore unrepresented by interest groups." Interests of vulnerable communities arose to the forefront of planning objectives and aimed to equal representation and accommodation of all people in planning processes (Davidoff 1965). Stewart and Lithgow (2015, p. 20) define the city "to be a place of high contestation, constant change and multiple externalities." It is also a place where different types of people, interests and structures interact. This creates a 'structural basis of power in the city' that results in a power imbalance between citizens and developers (Stewart and Lithgow 2015).

The decentralization of planning institutions and systems had a strong effect on people's social well-being (Lane 2005). The planning field shifted towards a transactive planning model where planners' role became one mediation of information

and support for the public to actively engage in the policy and planning processes (Lane 2005). Advocacy and equity planning stood in marked contrast to the dominant approach to planning as highly normative, scientific and technocratic. Still, as Lane (2005, p. 297) argues, “the kinds of knowledge used in planning practice, and the conceptualization of the planning and decision-making context determine the extent of participation offered to the public.” In the 1980s, participation became a dominant methodology in the planning field. It served as a methodology to engage “local knowledge to produce better outcomes, reverse power relations, and move from a process driven by outside experts to one where outsiders learn from local people” (Sorensen and Sagaris 2010, p. 300).

### **Community and Community Engagement**

Community is a frequently used concept, but ‘what is a community?’ can be defined, experienced and understood differently. ‘Community’ can be defined along three aspects: geographic community or neighbourhood, a community of identity, and a community of interest and solidarity (Aggarwal 2015). Geographic community or neighbourhood refers to a spatially defined community. These communities can have different socio-economic backgrounds, religions and interests, and the community’s distinction solely relies on the population who occupies these particular physical spaces. Community-based identity is characterized by people with similar characteristics and intersectional attributes such as culture, age, gender, religion, art, customs and language (Aggarwal 2015). Culturally shared identities create a sense of belonging in such communities. Nevertheless, the boundaries of the community are never fixed. Someone who identifies as a woman may not relate with other women solely based on gender. There are other factors such as religion, race and socio-economic background that someone can identify within that community. The community of interest and solidarity have their roots in a wide range of claims and social movements and are currently expressed in movements such as Black Lives Matter, or around issues of poverty reduction, climate change and education. These interests can be organized formally through organizations, or community members can participate informally where the degree of participation varies for each individual

(Aggarwal 2015). Therefore, the idea of community ties has shifted from orthodox views of geographic or class-based connections to more cultural and identity-based ties (Beebeejaun 2006).

Communities are nevertheless ‘constructed’ (Stewart and Lithgow 2015) as they can be defined through narratives, discourses and ideas and can also be defined by others, and as a result, be contested. As mentioned above, many communities are self-mobilized due to particular governance or policy initiatives such as social and rights movements. Stewart and Lithgow (2015 p. 21) showcase examples of how communities can be constructed in policy terms “as ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ ‘inclusive’ or ‘exclusive’ depending upon how policy-makers and politicians frame them”. The concept is constructed as policymakers, politicians, and professionals favour communities “whose behavioural change can be linked logically to the achievement of desired outcomes and who can be encouraged to take part in policy engagement processes” (Stewart and Lithgow 2015, p. 21).

A community can be both relational and geographical. Rudkin (in Totikidis, Armstrong and Francis 2005) points to the emergence and presence of virtual communities – made currently evident in the global COVID-19 pandemic where virtual communities and participation extend to various individuals worldwide. Through these communities, whether relational, geographical or virtual, individuals participate in engagement and involvement to express their needs and interests. Totikidis, Armstrong and Francis (2005, p.1) define community governance in the same context as “community participation, engagement and decision in public matters and is related to terms such as local governance, social governance, network governance and participatory governance.” Through these community ties and connections, individuals participate in different spaces to defend their community interests.

Within community development projects, the community is commonly used to describe either stakeholders or the public (general or community) (Johnston 2010). By defining community stakeholders as “any group or individuals who can affect or is affected by organization purpose” (Freeman 1984: 52 as cited in Thornock 2016:2) and characterizing publics based on their communication behaviours (Grunig and

Repper 1992) allows for a better understanding of the relationship of these individuals to the community. Categorizing and labelling community members' types is significant in terms of their involvement, context and impact within community issues and concerns (Johnston 2010). Johnston's (2010) research examines how literature and theory can inform the practice of community engagement. Johnston's (2010) study explores community engagement practice's theoretical underpinnings and proposes a relational framework in understanding community engagement. For Johnston (2010, p. 221), such "relational perspective is founded on communication as a process 'to create or negotiate shared understandings' with community members." Such a relational framework emphasizes interactions and mutual adaptations.

Both Johnston (2010) and Stewart and Lithgow (2015) state the lack of terminology and literature discourse on 'community engagement.' There is some confusion on the meaning of the term in practice as 'consultation', 'engagement' and 'participation' are often used interchangeably within the planning field. Johnston (2010, p. 230) discusses how "the common claim in practice is that information equals consultation." In contrast, Stewart and Lithgow (2015, p. 19) explain the common understanding that "consultation involves a lesser level of involvement than engagement." The word engagement can be viewed and correlated with being more inclusive in the process; however, the term can also be used in a broad spectrum where citizens can be involved in decision-making processes on public matters. Stewart and Lithgow (2015, p. 19) define community engagement as "structured processes for involving citizens in decision-making." They explain that this engagement process can include "information-giving, consultation (two-way interchange) or extend up to participation (direct involvement in decision-making)" (Stewart and Lithgow 2015, p. 19). Therefore, having a precise terminology of how we use consultation, engagement and participation in literature and practice is significant. These concepts do not have the same consensus and cannot be used interchangeably. This is the challenge many scholars have pointed to in public participation in planning.

The divide between engagement and influence on decision-making is grounded in "the lack of poor reporting of evaluation of community engagement processes and outcomes" (Johnston 2010, p. 231). Consultation is a requirement for many

municipalities to receive approval for the development. However, there are no regulations to ensure that community engagement is deemed successful through evaluations and matrix systems. Johnston (2010) emphasizes how significant it is to evaluate engagement as it keeps the system, or the organization involved accountable to the projects' outcomes. The role of planners and planning consultants plays an essential part in enhancing community engagement by outlining clear impact and output objectives (Johnston 2010).

### **Public Participation**

The concept of participation “can be used to evoke – and to signify – almost anything that involves people” (Cornwall 2008, p. 269). Participation in planning practice has not been widely discussed in the literature (Lane 2005), but it has been popularized by Arnstein (1969), who demonstrates various participation levels. The ladder for participation is a path-breaking representation of the relationships between citizens and governance; and it has been very significant when discussing citizen participation and engagement (Stewart and Lithgow 2015, p. 19). Furthermore, Brownill and Parker (2010) also express the significance of quoting Arnstein’s analysis. Arnstein (1969) highlights the power of any discourse on participation and the power relation between different actors in communities – showing how to challenge the traditional and structural power imbalances in participation and refine the system to be collaborative and participatory?

Arnstein (1969) organizes the degree of participation of citizens in the form of a ladder where therapy and manipulation sit at the lowest level of non-participation. The next level of involvement is referred to as a “degree of tokenism,” where people are informed and consulted; however, their input is unaccounted for and has no scope of influence on the project. The highest level of participation, “degrees of citizen power,” indicates where the project emphasizes partnership, citizen control and delegated power. Arnstein’s (1969) ladder of participation shows gradations of participation in terms of the degree of power or control individuals can assert to influence a project or development. As Arnstein (1969, p.216) defends, “there is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having

the real power needed to affect the outcomes of the process.” But participation remains a contested concept. Cornwall (2008) described ‘invited spaces’ where citizens are provided opportunities to participate are often structured and controlled by the people who offer them, no matter how participatory it may seem. Such ‘invitations’ can be made in response to statutory obligations or their initiatives, and the result of such a process of participation does not always equate to having a voice. It is also important to note that community members often highlight the significance of ‘being heard’ and their opinions and concerns taken seriously within the planning processes. The idea of ‘being heard’ is seen as a vital indication of a successful engagement and participation process rather than getting a particular outcome (Stewart and Lithgow 2015).

When policymakers and planners seek public participation, it signifies the need for public input, therefore decentralizing power distribution. For Davidoff (1965, p. 332), “[t]he recommendation that city planners represent and plead the plans of many interest groups are founded upon the need to establish an effective urban democracy, one in which citizens may be able to play an active role in the process of deciding public policy.” In this process, the public’s role is not to simply be part of the process but rather to contribute to the outcome of any plan, policy or project. As stated earlier, being part of the process does not indicate that one could impact the results of any project. As Nelson et al. (2008, p. 40) put it, too often “the community does not seem to affect outcomes, and participants feel like they are being asked to approve predetermined plans.” For deep participation, community members are to be part of the process from very early on. As Cornwall (2008, p. 278) suggests, “translating voice into influence requires more than simply effective ways of capturing what people want to say; it involves efforts ‘from above’ and ‘from below.’” Therefore, in public participation, addressing the scope of influence in a project is essential as it indicates the public’s role in the process and their impact on the outcomes. Additionally, Cornwall (2008, p. 280) emphasizes the importance of “to be clear about exactly which decisions the public have the opportunity to participate in, and indeed which members of the public participate in different kinds of decision-making fora.”

Although participation encourages community members and representatives to exert influence on projects, the decision is evidently in the government’s hands. Still,

the participation process secures a conversation and interaction of communities to allow for trade-offs and give and take of interests (Stewart and Lithgow 2015). But the participation process in itself is contested as it is never a perfect process. There are many concerns to be considered, such as the power relations between actors and their interests that inevitably have a significant role in shaping and reshaping the outcomes (Cornwall 2008). A process where participants are actively engaged from identifying the project to the decision-making process is sometimes described as ‘deep’ participation. Still, the participatory process remains ideal for any planning process – even though its full and just accomplishment is practically impossible (Cornwall 2008). Instead, Cornwall (2008, p. 276) argues that “it makes more sense to think in terms of optimum participation: getting the balance between depth and inclusion right for the purpose at hand.” Despite the best intentions and efforts to make a particular process inclusionary and equitable, the process might deepen the exclusionary practices of particular groups. The question of who is representing vulnerable populations inherently becomes a challenge. Some individuals might also choose to be excluded in the process (Cornwall 2008). This is particularly the case where self-exclusion or non-participation is manifested by individuals who do not have certainty in the process due to past experiences. Self-exclusion is pragmatic as it demonstrates the non-participants’ views on the project and plan. It is their way of voicing their opinion by not participating in the process due to a waste of time (Cornwall 2008).

Stewart and Lithgow (2015 p. 20) define the roles of different key actors in the engagement and participation processes as a challenge to “the power of professional expertise [where] [p]ublic servants enjoy a privileged role as administrators and gatekeepers. Politicians employ their strategic position to bargain for favourable outcomes. Interest-group theory suggests that the characteristics and resources of the interests concerned will shape their ability to influence outcomes.” Therefore, this view suggests that those who have resources and educational background are the ones who have a scope of influence on policy outcomes than those who do not possess such resources and influence. Therefore, the process creates power imbalances amongst planners, politicians and other professional key players and interest groups who have a high degree of power in society and community members. This power imbalance is



also exacerbated by the fact that the “structural determinants of power in relation to planning and development strongly favours the government and the development industry” as they have and generally protect their decision-making power (Stewart and Lithgow 2015, p. 23).

In recent years, participatory and collaborative planning has been criticized for its incomplete processes (Watson 2014). As discussed before, the true meaning of public participation varies in theory and in practice. It is believed that participatory planning can improve “social capital, increase social cohesion, strengthen democracy, and achieve better environmental outcomes” (Sorensen and Sagaris 2010, p. 298). However, Sorenson and Sagaris (2010) demonstrate how participation processes often give a low scope of influence and decision-making power. In contrast, the big picture strategies and solutions are done at the top. Furthermore, Swyngedouw (2000) adds that “governance beyond the state” can perpetuate undemocratic practices by having decisions made behind closed doors and not in a transparent process. As a result, participatory planning can be inequitable in these terms if not done through an equity and collaborative lens.

### **Co-Production and Neighbourhood Governance**

Participation also informs the term ‘co-production,’ where political economist Elinor Ostrom (1996, p. 1073) defines it as “a process through which inputs from individuals who are not ‘in’ the same organization are transformed into goods and services.” Co-production is where the involvement of the state and communities can create synergies by providing different ‘expert’ knowledge where communities have “local knowledge, time, skills and the state has resources and technical expertise” (Watson 2013, p. 64).

In collaborative and communicative planning, the discourse has been centred on how the government shapes plans, much less around the involvement in delivery processes (Watson 2014). Co-production processes come into place to respond to formal engagement processes that do not exist or do not meet community needs. It seeks to find different channels to engage and produce a collaborative procedure (Watson 2014). Watson (2014) states that the communities’ involvement in all

delivery processes is valuable. The stages include “implementation (which can mean physical construction and actual service delivery), and in cases of bottom-up co-production, community control over all stages from initiation of intervention, to data collection and analysis, to planning, implementation and management, as an essential part of their approach” (Watson 2014, p. 69).

Co-production is a neighbourhood governance component where it assesses the partnerships between citizens, communities, and public actors (Tournas 2016). Citizens work together to bring solutions and improve the quality of life by merging partnerships. This could be understood as residents assert their ‘right to the city’ in their role in public decision-making and increase residents’ role in the community’s governance. Sorenson and Sagaris (2010, p. 302) explain that “cities are shared spaces, and that citizens collectively have the right to influence decisions, not only to prevent nuisances but also to create more liveable places.”

Increasingly collaborative governance has been a form of engagement that is a required division by local governments and finding alternative forms of state-society engagement. Shifting the structural system to a more collaborative and democratic institution allows for transformative strategies and solutions (Stewart and Lithgow 2015, Watson 2013). Although local governance and citizen participation are appreciated, it is not to say that the responsibility and obligation should be on residents to bring change and transformation. The state’s role is to encourage and promote collaboration and co-production for residents to practice local governance. It is not equitable to ask citizens to assert their right to be involved in decision-making; instead, it is equitable to make public participation and engagement a priority in the planning process. Watson (2014, p. 63) introduces a concept referred to as “empowered participatory governance “which relies on ordinary people’s commitment and capacities and ties action to the discussion.

Neighbourhood governance is seen as participative and has a bottom-up approach in addressing community concerns (Tuurnas 2016). Lowndes and Sullivan (2008) identify four types of neighbourhood governance: neighbourhood empowerment, neighbourhood partnership, neighbourhood government, and neighbourhood management --where citizens’ role, leadership, and key objectives

differ. Some challenges need to be considered when we examine neighbourhood governance. Tuurnas (2016) identifies four challenges: capacity, competence, diversity, and equity that assess neighbourhood governance's complexity. Capacity refers to the trade-off between the level of residents' involvement and the scope of influence they have on the project. Competence and diversity address the challenges of finding participants who represent the whole community. Within communities, there are different interests and concerns, so choosing participants who embody the community's goals and objectives as a whole is complex. Lastly, equity is making choices about diversity and ensuring whose voice is heard and which interests are prioritized.

#### **4. Outreach and Engagement Approaches of the City of Toronto**

After reviewing the literature on community engagement, public participation, and neighborhood governance, the following section reviews the different approaches and programs used by the City of Toronto to solicit engagement or participation from the larger public. The goal is to better understand how the City invites engagement, the process by which engagement occurs, which groups are particularly targeted (if any) and the main motivations behind each program or initiative. There are currently six outreach and engagement methods or initiatives listed in the City of Toronto's Planning and Development department that showcase various approaches. They are: Design Review Panel, Toronto Planning Review Panel, Planners in Public Spaces, Chief Planner Roundtable, Youth Engagement Strategy, and Growing Conversations.

**The Design Review Panel** is an engagement method that seeks technical and professional advice from design professionals - architects, landscape architects, urban designers and engineers. The purpose of the 'professional' engagement is to advise city staff for improving matters of design that affect the public realm, such as the design of streets, parks, open spaces and buildings. The professionals are volunteers that support topics such as "preserving the uniqueness of a place, maintaining vitality, ensuring comfort and safety, and making new development compatible with its surroundings" (City of Toronto 2021). This panel is an important tool in the development approval process as the panelists provide advice on private and public

projects and input in new urban design policy. In addition, the Design Review Panel supports development projects to ensure the standard of the development avoids compromising on quality and meets the design of the existing neighbourhood.

Although this panel is vital in the development project and professional and expert knowledge in the planning field is certainly important, this form of ‘expert’ engagement with professionals has limitations. Review discussions do not include meaningful conversations about design that can affect the quality of life of a neighborhood and particularly of vulnerable populations. For example, defensive urbanism has long been keeping specific individuals out of parks and public spaces. Therefore, when seeking advice and input for design, perspectives of individuals in particular communities, primarily seldom heard individuals, should be considered – which it is not in this Design Review Panel. The viewpoint of professionals only meets the requirements of the policies and guidelines put in place; however, it does not reflect how space can be used and the restrictions that the design of the space can create. Creating inclusive and accessible spaces requires technical advice and the public’s input to achieve a meaningful engagement. How this technical advice is sought and chosen is also not clear.

**The Toronto Planning Review Panel** initiative was established in 2015 to improve public engagement in the City of Toronto by receiving input from various populations. The panel consists of 28 members randomly selected via Civic Lottery to represent Torontonians by supporting the City Planning Division with growth and change in Toronto. Selected representatives are asked to work together to provide public input on major planning initiatives (sometimes as long as for two years). Some of the projects discussed by this Planning Review Panel are Missing Middle, Digital Infrastructure Plan, Exhibition Place Master Plan, King-Parliament Secondary Plan and Housing Now.

This Review Panel’s representatives meet monthly to discuss projects from both a resident and a public perspective. The panelists provide advice on the impact that project or planning initiative might have on the existing and future residents of the community. The considerations of all Torontonians are taken into account, and there

is a dialogue of different perspectives, which encourages the experiences of all group members.

This panel was created as an additional method of engagement and did not replace other modes of public consultation. It is stated on the City of Toronto's (2021) website that they are aware that traditional consultation methods do not always allow equal opportunity to voice the experiences and opinions of the diverse population. The insights of the panel discussions are referenced in reports to Council and published on the City's website. The panel has been designed to collaborate and exchange knowledge between resident members and city planners, independent experts, and other stakeholders. The collaborative engagement method brings forth a way of engaging with the public based on random representation. While this approach promotes a meaningful conversation by engaging with residents on large-scale projects, questions are raised about how representatives of particular interests such panels might be. Moreover, a question of permanence is raised as there are no records of the panel meetings in 2020 and 2021. It seems like they have discontinued this engagement method perhaps because of the pandemic, perhaps for good.

**The Planners in Public Spaces (PiPS)** is an engagement initiative established by City Planning in 2013 for its Strategic Plan to achieve the action item under the Strategic Direction for "clear, consistent and compelling communication" (City of Toronto 2017). This engagement is new both in its purpose and practice as it works to bring planners to the people and meet them where they are -- in community spaces, parks, recreation centres and some special events like farmers markets or festivals. This engagement allows planners and the public to engage in one-on-one conversations on issues concerning the City and anything specific to city development and policy. The purpose is to create access to municipal planners for the public who do not or cannot attend formal public consultation meetings. The nature and the setting of the engagement are very informal and straightforward. The planners bring a tent, a table, some planning materials and are ready to chat with anyone with a question or comment. This initiative is run on a volunteer basis from the city planners from various departments such as Community Planning, Parks, Transportation Planning and Urban Design and Graphics

The conversations that may take place in this engagement may not be the same in those traditional settings; they are usually more casual and less organized. This type of engagement is however effective as planners directly outreach communities in the spaces they feel most comfortable and familiar with. In addition, planners in these settings engage the public understanding of city-building further to increase potential citizen participation in the planning process. The goals of the engagement are said to be to learn, to teach, to partner, to contribute and to innovate. These goals are underpinned by collaboration. For example, the innovative goal specifies that they would like “to engage the public in a variety of ways; to reach segments of the public City Planning does not usually engage, and to attract people to events using new methods and tools.” Reaching out people is a laudable goal but to what extent can these voluntary initiatives take place across the city and for different types of projects? How much input is gathered from residents and how much of this input translates into significant change remains a question.

**The Chief Planner Roundtable** initiative is a public forum where Toronto residents can discuss key city-building challenges and new ways to grow and change. The roundtables are underpinned by the principles of collaborative engagement “where industry professionals, community leaders, and City staff discuss ideas about pressing issues in an open creative environment” (City of Toronto 2019). The roundtable setting is informal and flexible. There are many ways for the public to participate in this roundtable: people can attend in person, watch the live stream, and contribute through Twitter, comments cards, or email. This access allows for a variety of ways the public can engage they most see fit. This approach allows the City Planning Division to create new partnerships and strengthens existing community partnerships.

This initiative implements the Strategic Plan principle of community participation and the Official Plan policy of promoting community awareness of planning issues. Some of the projects discussed at this roundtable are BioDiverseTO, Design Excellence: Implementation in Public Project, and Toronto’s Ravine: Intersection of Nature and City and Planning Cities for Families. These are larger issues affecting the city as a whole – and again, it is not clear how information gathered is used. There are no records of public forums past May 2017.

**The Youth Engagement Strategy** was created with City Planning, Youth Research Team, Swerhun Facilitation, Maximum City and Urban Strategies Inc. The vision of the youth engagement strategy was to ‘mobilize a new generation to engage in city building.’ The strategy has nine guiding principles, four focus areas and 20 actions to implement and enforce the vision of the strategy. The guiding principles inform all youth engagement undertaken by City planning in the future. The youth research team played an essential role in the facilitation process as they connected with other youth “to understand what issues matter most to them, when and how to involve youth in city-building conversations and how to build youth understanding and engagement in city-building” (City of Toronto 2015, p. 8). The four focus areas are School & Education; Youth Hubs; Promotion, Engagement and Community; and “30+U” Ambassadors. These focus areas contain specific actions to implement recommendations. A report was published in a 150-page document in 2015 after a five-week research period with over 400 youth participants across more than 15 Toronto neighbourhoods (City of Toronto 2015). The methods used in the consultations were surveys, pop-up town halls and facilitated workshops.

Youth engagement is vital to city building and overall civic participation. This strategy lays the foundation for how youth can be involved and include youth in city planning studies and projects. However, the strategy is a resource for planners to use as a reference and guide to engage with youth, not a requirement. While the strategy has been effective and provides a solid framework for youth participation; the strategy remains a resource document, not a mandate that City staff or private sector professionals must use in their community engagement strategy.

**The Growing Conversations** initiative was launched in January 2014 under the City Planning Division to make Toronto the “most engaged city in North America on urban planning issues” (City of Toronto 2015, p. 6). The main objectives of the initiative are: to better understand the strengths and weaknesses of the current community planning process in Toronto; to explore new engagement models and tools; to explore opportunities and best practices related to implementing Community Planning Advisory Groups in each ward; to explore opportunities to broaden participation by engaging new audiences; and to identify other potential opportunities

to improve engagement in the current community planning process. The process unfolds with the City Planning Division identifying a series of new audiences that it would like to engage more effectively in the planning process, including youth aged 18–30.

This initiative emphasizes consultation with the public and stakeholders to be an essential element of the planning process in Ontario. The engagement process with the public is to achieve an outcome that contributes towards the public good and the best interest of the communities. In Table 1, the objectives of this initiative and the tools used to put these goals into practice are presented. The tools are some of the outreach methods, some of them are essential engagement tools, such as dedicated project webpages, toolkits, powerpoint presentations, community meetings and open houses. Growing Conversations led to some special engagement initiatives as TOCore Avatars, Toronto Planning Review Panel and Planners in Public Spaces. Table 1 illustrates the number of reasons that City planners engage with the public and stakeholders (City of Toronto 2015). Table 2 presents the timing of engagement (City of Toronto 2015).

**Table 1: Goals and Tools for Growing Conversations: “Why do we engage?”**

Goal	Description	Tools
To build capacity and inform participation	A primary objective of any engagement process is to build capacity and generate the kind of mutual learning needed for constructive dialogue to occur. This means ensuring that residents and stakeholders are equipped with the correct information that will allow them to engage meaningfully in a process.	Dedicated project webpages toolkits, designed to both inform and engage ppt presentations, videos open in a new window, discussion panels featuring experts and community members, pop-up consultations through Planners in Public Spaces (PiPs) initiative
To inform planning processes	A primary objective of our public engagement is to inform planning processes. This includes, most typically, the development review process but also occurs through processes related to planning studies and Official Plan reviews.	Community meetings, open houses, focus groups, specialized online surveys and tools
To facilitate city building.	A key objective of the City’s new Strategic Actions 2013-2018 is city-	



	building, including implementing innovative urban growth strategies that ensure growth positively contributes to Toronto as a place to live, work and play. Ensuring that this city building occurs positive dialogue with residents and stakeholders around issues of city-wide importance and that impact quality of life. Currently, there is no formalized regular process dedicated to city building. However, recently, initiatives such as PiPs and the Chief Planner Roundtables have been convened to enable more effective discussions around city building.	
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**Table 2: Process of Growing Conversations: “When do we engage”**

Example	Description
Reception of a specific development application	When a property owner wants to redevelop a piece of land, they must typically submit a development application to the City. The review of development applications is a big part of what City Planning does. In 2013, City Planning processed over 3,800 development applications. The process involves a public meeting before a planning report is prepared by staff. The public is always welcome to make comments at the Community Council meeting where the report is tabled.
A neighbourhood-based planning process is initiated.	Area-based plans are created in high-growth areas or areas requiring special attention (like the waterfront or Heritage Conservation Districts). These might be Secondary Plans, Avenue Studies, or Urban Design studies. For example, in 2013, the City initiated three Heritage Conservation District studies and Eglinton Connects, a detailed planning analysis of the entire route of the Eglinton LRT.
A city-wide planning process or special study is initiated	Some planning processes are of city-wide importance, as the 5-year review of our Official Plan policies currently underway, the Tall Buildings Guidelines, Feeling Congested?, or Growing Conversations.
Initiation of a ‘talk’ about city building.	Sometimes conversations about big ideas that set city-wide priorities, like the Chief Planner Roundtable are needed. Sometimes, these discussions serve to ‘check-in with us’ and ask some questions, like with PiPs.

## **Engaging Critical Questions**

The City of Toronto's engagement methods described earlier in this section suggest that there is a lack of mention of difference, equity and access to decision-making. To suggest objectives and goals to achieve an inclusive process, factors that create barriers to engagement, such as socioeconomic status, resident status, family structure, language, lack of trust in institutions and critical analysis of how race and history play a role in engagement and participation in civic duties, must be acknowledged. The approaches provided by the City of Toronto is a stepping stone in the engagement direction, however, it fails to meaningfully engage in a discourse of how such engagement methods can be impediments to public consultation.

Each interaction with the public must be through a critical urban theory perspective where ideas of power, inequality, injustice and exploitation are given prominence. Through my interviews, planners and councillors often pointed out a power imbalance during public consultations. Professionals who are considered experts in the field may have a more prominent presence and voice in the room, whereas the residents are queued to speak and have a specific time limit. The Toronto Planning Review Panel and Chief Planner Roundtable can perpetuate power imbalance between the public and city staff and expert panelists from the engagement initiatives described above.

Several questions arise when engagement and outreach approaches are used: What purpose does this engagement method serve? Is it an inclusive process? Who is representative of the community? Does the engagement process include placemaking to create a sense of belonging and place? Are the planning processes informed through equity and anti-racism lens? Whom does the engagement serve? What are some ways we can evaluate the success of the approaches? Are these approaches stand-alone or used with various other methods to provide a diversity of outcomes? Is the engagement initiative currently active and being used?

Asking key critical questions would provide a pathway for planners and the public to enhance the community engagement methods and contribute towards an equitable outcome for all individuals in Toronto communities. Racialized people are not a monolith; they have diverse lived experiences, histories and traumas they carry

with them. A type of engagement and outreach that recognizes, appreciates and acts upon such diversity of experiences, histories and traumas is needed.

### **Do citizens need to be better educated?**

The role of citizens in the planning processes is significant, and it plays a vital role in bringing concerns and issues to the table that planners and developers may not have thought about or simply omitted. The sharing and exchanging knowledge and information between professionals and the public is an essential element of the planning process. Konsti-Laakso and Rantala (2018, p. 1041) state that “participation is as a good and ethical practice - the right thing to do.” Participation is an essential element from a philosophical and pragmatic approach and provides new knowledge and idea generation. However, for participation to be influential, the public needs to have “both opportunities and resources to implement the ideas developed” (Tippet and How 2020, p. 125).

As mentioned, the power imbalance and lack of meaningful participation can contribute to citizen’s trust in public institutions, especially when participants feel ignored, disrespected or manipulated within the process (Laurian and Shaw 2009). Participation can bring awareness of local issues within the communities that otherwise would not have been apparent without public input. Additionally, participation in public consultation can increase social inclusiveness and social capital for residents in the community (Laurian and Shaw 2009). Hanna (2000, p. 401) suggests that “the relationship between participation and information centres on the nature of the participation.” As Hannah (2000, p. 401) further explains, the critical question to ask is ‘Who is participating in the process and how?’ Participation contributes to the generation of new information so the influence should be synergistic and collaborative.

Since the evaluation of participation emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s, there has not been a set of principles that researchers have agreed on to claim as successful methods. Literature around participation states that it is difficult to measure the success of participation as there are various factors to consider, such as the residents’ perspectives, what planners see as success, what developers assume as success and

lastly, the outcome of the project. Furthermore, participation relied on a few case studies, and within those studies, participation evaluation research is scarce. Planners have so far assessed the success of participation on a set of criteria, both formal and informal evaluation. According to Laurian and Shaw (2009, p. 305), such evaluation takes place “in terms of process-based criteria: that the process is transparent and inclusive, that participants understand issues and feel respected, and that the agency hears public input; in terms of outcomes-based criteria: that solution is found, that decisions are of high quality and legitimate, and that trust is fostered; and in terms of user-based criteria: that participants are satisfied.” Although these are valid criteria, it is somewhat technical and less participant centred and more centred on the purpose of reaching the goals of the project. There is no mention of the scope of influence of the public, the diversities of knowledge and identities and socioeconomic background. Christiansen (2015, p. 456) suggests that “planning will be successful so long as the diversities and idiosyncrasies of neighbourhoods, their organizations, and their people are understood and respected.” Furthermore, the process should be inclusive of the diversities of the public affected and “requires a sensitivity to the multiplicities of persons and groups within urban spaces, and is easier to achieve earlier in engagement than later. Achieving inclusion, and not just participation is a greater challenge particularly when it comes to formal municipal processes” (Christiansen 2015, p. 467). Still, Laurian and Shaw (2009, p. 294) suggest that planning professionals and academics “lack definitions and criteria of success in participation as well as methods to assess participatory processes.” Given the few studies and the lack of evaluation, it is difficult to compare findings and methods to see what works and what does not work. Comparative evaluations of participation processes and outcomes are needed if planners are to take participation seriously.

Yet, the planning field is still dominated by scientific and expert knowledge. This dominance creates tension with ‘engaging’ with local communities and residents who often have ‘non-expert knowledge’ that is practical and lived experience-based (Konsti-Laakso and Rantala 2018). Such tension can be seen as positive though as the mix of ‘expert’ and ‘lay’ knowledge helps contribute to realistic ideas for actions and increases goals and objectives.

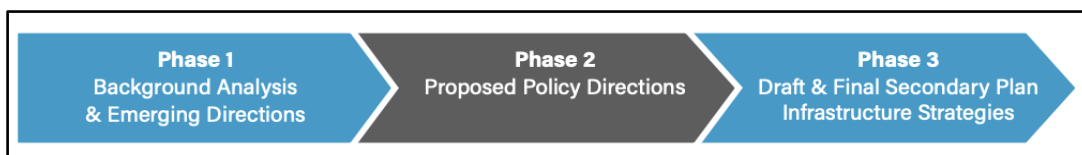
Tippet and How (2020) suggest that the order that questions are asked is important as such order affects the power dynamics between actors. For instance, a public consultation starts by asking residents about the problems and challenges they have in their communities or neighborhoods would suggest that they are the ones with problems and the ‘experts’ are there to solve problems and provide solutions. Language and perspective are important in public consultation to acknowledge community assets, skills, and resources that participants have and could be utilized in a given project. It is not always the case where the community is the ‘problem’ and the ‘experts’ bring solutions and strategies to fix the ‘problem’. Capacity building and leveraging already existing relationships and partnerships are vital to participation. Tippet and How (2020, p. 126) conclude that “the process of residents/service users and project officers developing ideas together helps build capacity, developing their ‘power to’ make change (as opposed to waiting for those with ‘power over’ to make changes for them).” In my interviews, planners and councillors have discussed the power imbalance in public consultations pre-COVID 19 and the restrictions and limitations that non-expert participants have during virtual public consultations. Power should be seen as “productive and positive, not only as restrictive and negative” (Flyvberg 2001, p. 131 as cited in Tippet and How 2020, p. 126).

## **5. Case Study – TOcore Planning Downtown**

How is engagement and participation specifically applied to the planning process in Toronto? The following section examines how residents were involved in the development and implementation of the TOcore Planning Downtown Plan. The TOcore Planning Downtown Plan is a “25-year vision that sets the direction for the city centre as the cultural, civic, retail and economic heart of Toronto as a great place to live” (City of Toronto 2021). The TOcore Downtown Plan is deemed the “blueprint to manage growth, sustain liveability, achieve complete communities and ensure there is space for the economy to grow” (City of Toronto 2021). Initiated in 2014, the TOcore study was adopted in 2016 by Council that outlined the policy directions and infrastructure changes (e.g., water, community services, public spaces) needed in the

Downtown Plan. In August 2017, the proposed TOcore Downtown Plan was published, laying out the foundation for the extensive public and stakeholder consultation in late 2017 and early 2018. The project was organized in a three-phased planning study led by the City Planning Division along with 13 other Divisions and various supporting agencies. The Plan defines the downtown area as bounded by Lake Ontario to the south, Bathurst Street to the west, the midtown rail corridor and Rosedale Valley Road to the north and the Don River to the east. In what follows, I highlight the principles and goals of the Downtown Plan as well the outreach and engagement methods used to engage residents and the public about their needs in the growing city.

On June 5, 2018, the Minister of Municipal Affairs and Housing issued a Notice of Decision approving Official Plan Amendment No. 406 (the Downtown Plan) with 224 modifications. This Notice of Decision started the TOcore initiative tasked with preparing and implementing a new plan for Toronto's Downtown core. The project includes five infrastructure-related strategies that guide the study: community services and facilities; energy; mobility; parks and public realm; and water. These strategies were selected to support the implementation of the planning initiative. Each strategy identifies infrastructure challenges facing a growing downtown, recommends implementation strategies and actions, advances related initiatives, sets timeframes, and determines required investments. The development of the TOcore Downtown Plan follows three phases as presented in Figure 1 below.



**Figure 1: TOcore Planning Downtown Phases**

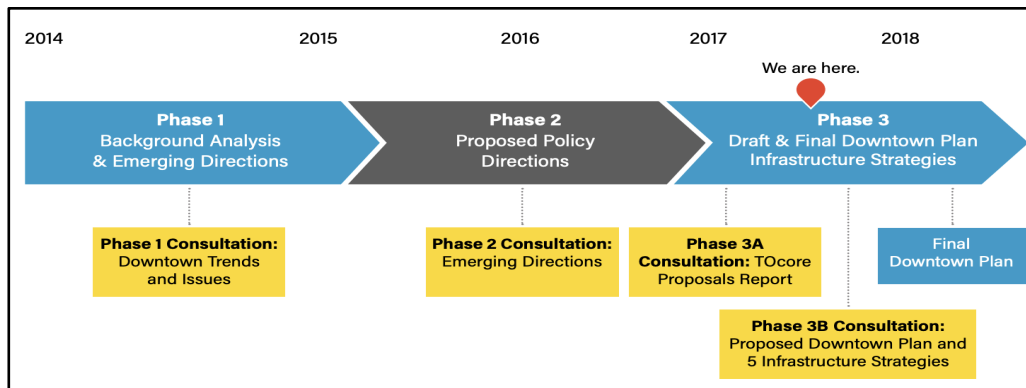
(Source: City of Toronto 2016, p. 4)

### **Engagement Process**

The major engagement initiative for this project was TOcore avatars, where several fictional stories are highlighted with various backgrounds, identities and socio-economic statuses to represent the diverse population in the downtown core. The

City's website states that the stories are not based on real people but emerged from demographic census data to create stories that residents can relate to. The tool allows residents and citizens to see 'their' stories reflected in the city planning processes. The avatar initiative was initially established in New York, where it is a common practice in the business community where businesses create customer profiles to ensure that they serve a diverse set of individuals and meet the needs of their customers. The City of Toronto applied this idea of identities and stories of people "to help us [residents] all better understand the great diversity that exists in Toronto and the many relationships that people have with our Downtown; and to help Torontonians reflect on their own experience of Downtown, and then to share it with us" (City of Toronto 2020). The avatars were meant to engage by asking "[i]s your experience similar to any of the Avatars? Is it different? In what ways?" (City of Toronto 2020).

Following the three phases of the project, the engagement process was organized in three steps (see Figure 2) where the City employed various methods of engagement and outreach to interact and seek input from downtown Toronto dwellers. As of 28 June 2021, there have been a total of 19 engagement interactions with the public. The City has utilized multiple engagement channels, including an online survey, community engagement toolkit responses, a stakeholder meeting, a public TOcore Expo, text messaging, Twitter, Planners in Public Spaces (PiPS), Toronto Planning Review Panel's feedback, Tumblr, focus groups, public open houses, email submissions and community and city council meetings (see Figure 3). At the time of writing this research, two additional committee meetings were scheduled for June 30, 2021, and September 14, 2021, to discuss economic and community development and infrastructure and the environment.



**Figure 2: TOcore Engagement Timeline**  
(Source: City of Toronto 2017, p. 4)



**Figure 3: Outreach and Engagement Methods  
in TOcore Planning Downtown**  
(Source: City of Toronto 2016, p. 6)

Four engagement reports published on the City’s website from June 2015 to May 2018 were examined. The engagement reports highlight the feedback received from the public and professional experts during the consultation meetings and panels and the survey results and number of people reach out to through a variety of communications tools and methods.

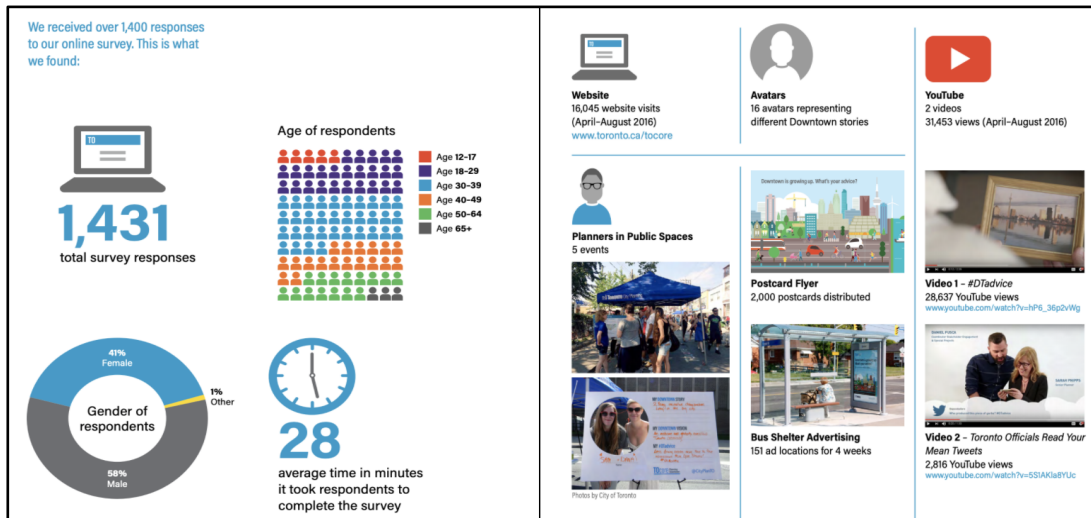


The project allowed for multiple communication channels for residents to be involved and provide input to the study. In the initial Phase 1: Consultation, three community consultation meetings were conducted in the style of an open house in Wards 20, 27 and 28 where those who live, work and visit downtown were invited to participate, totalling approximately 120 participants. The questions asked during the consultation were around five concepts: planning framework and economy; parks and public realm; community services and facilities; transportation; water; and energy. One comment in the first round of community consultation mentioned de-centralizing engagement to address high illiteracy and language barriers (City of Toronto 2015, p. 13). Interestingly enough, this was the only comment which was not a response to the questions asked but an additional comment that wanted the engagement to be inclusive in order to eliminate any barrier within the process.

Each consultation was organized as an open house with a town hall style presentation of the TOcore study team explaining the project's purpose, goals, and timeline. After the presentation, the public had an opportunity to ask questions and any clarifications on the study. Following the questions and answers session, the public was invited to look at each panel station and provide their input in writing by placing sticky notes on the plans and/or engaging in conversation with City staff. All three consultations were scheduled at 6:30 pm, which implies and particularly invites those who work in office jobs and do not have childcare responsibilities to attend. Access was a recurring conversation during my interviews when discussing the challenges and barriers of public consultation. A councillor and two planners voiced the same concerns about individuals who work evening shifts, especially that the area in which the study took place has a large population that does shift work. Although no particular time might be ideal, the 6:30 scheduling raises the question, "how can the engagement process transition into a model that does not work around the 9-5 type of employment?" The current format for public consultation held by City staff is frequently scheduled after work hours in the evenings, and in the form of an open house with the developer and other professionals involved in the study. This format fails to account for workers outside of that 9 to 5 schedule, and those individuals who have part-time, precarious or multiple employment. It is not a surprise to councillors

or planners that the consultation meeting times create barriers to participation. One planner suggested that engagement and interaction can be tailored to the community based on demographics and other factors. By understanding the community's socioeconomic background and employment status, the planning study can make accommodations and provide alternative options for an inclusive process.

In the second phase of the engagement, there was a showcase of the 'number of people outreached,' but numbers by themselves do not guarantee genuine engagement and participation (see Figure 4).



**Figure 4: Survey Results and Outreach by the Numbers**  
(Source: City of Toronto 2016, pp. 6-7)

As McComas (2001) reminds us, evaluation can be of two types: process-oriented and outcome-oriented. A process-oriented evaluation focuses on the number of people who participated, how many people provided feedback (whether verbal or written); whether participants represent a broader community; and how well a consultation event is publicized. On the other hand, outcome-oriented criteria speak towards the content received from the participants, the relevance of comments given by the participants, whether participants' comments ultimately influence or not the decision, whether participants are satisfied with the process and whether the

relationship of trust or rapport between participants and the agencies exist and improve.

In TOcore Planning Downtown, the process-oriented criteria are prevalent, as demonstrated in Figure 4. There is a high value put on the number of participants reached out through the different communication channels. This topic is very much discussed by professionals on how to better the process of engagement. The Canadian Urban Institute (CUI) hosted a panel in April 2021 featuring Jane Farrow, Nicole Swerhun, Zahra Ebrahim, and Amanda Gibbs titled “How Will Public Engagement and Participation Process Change?” One of the main takeaways from the panelists was “it is time to do away with ‘the numbers game’ in public engagement and participation.” The discussion between the professionals was to de-emphasize the idea of ‘numbers’ and instead focus on meaningful conversations and substantive comments. This CUI panel made clear that engagement is indeed better supported by a qualitative rather than quantitative argument. When discussing online and offline consultation, Zahra Ebrahim (2020) argues for “the opportunity to get out of the numbers game when it comes to consultation and to think about deep qualitative work with folks who are underrepresented in building more intimate spaces... I’ve done tons of research using text messages with folks who live in remote communities and don’t have access to data continually – and I think it is now the moment to look at going deep with fewer people rather than broad with many.”

The main focus of community engagement should be the substantive quality of conversations and discussions had with residents rather than the number of people reached. As Ebrahim mentioned, talks with smaller groups can build the foundation of the engagement process and influence how public consultation can be held by both the public and private sectors.

## **6. Community Engagement and Public Consultation: Pre- and During COVID-19**

On March 17, 2020, the government of Ontario declared a provincial state of emergency under the province’s Emergency Management and Civil Protection Act.

Since March 2020, cities and other municipalities are working to ensure the health, safety and well-being of citizens are protected. Municipal politicians and policymakers are responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and making decisions and changes to keep essential services afloat. During the beginning of the pandemic when the spread of the virus was quickly reaching the majority of the world, many media outlets have referred to the pandemic as a ‘great equalizer’ (Timothy 2020). However, it quickly became the complete opposite as the pandemic exacerbated existing inequities and injustices of vulnerable members of society, now exposed to COVID-19. Health, race, economic and social perspectives matter when we discuss COVID-19 and how it has affected many individuals and communities more than others. As a result, the pandemic reveals the fear and mistrust of health systems by many Black, Indigenous and other racialized communities who have experienced systemic racist violence for generations. The pandemic has also increased hate crimes and xenophobia around the world (Timothy 2020).

Amnesty International Canada, a non-governmental organization, wrote an open letter, signed by more than 300 organizations, academics and politicians on April 15, 2020, stated:

Often overlooked is the greater or differential impact of the pandemic itself on First Nations, Métis and Inuit communities, Black and other racialized communities (especially individuals of Asian origin), the elderly, people living with disabilities, women and children at risk of violence in the home, refugees and migrants, people marginalized because of gender identity or sexual orientation, minority official language communities, prisoners, sex workers, people who are homeless or living in inadequate housing, people who use drugs, precariously employed workers, and other at-risk communities.

Amnesty International Canada urges governments to establish action plans that protect and safeguard vulnerable populations against abuses. The decisions are made at high-level governments without the concern or input of those who would be most

affected by the decision. The important decisions being made by cities during the pandemic greatly exclude Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC) communities. At the same time, and fed by concurrent events, anti-Black racism and Truth and Reconciliation calls for actions and reforms in Canadian cities have multiplied to ensure policies and practices changes to better acknowledge and meet the needs of communities affected.

Many studies and research have been undertaken to better understand the heightened disparities that COVID-19 has surfaced for cities across Canada and the world. One of these came from the Windsor Law Centre for Cities (at the University of Windsor) who published a report in September 2020 entitled “Decision-making and participatory governance in Canadian municipalities during COVID-19.” The focus of the study was to examine Canadian municipal governance under states of emergency in the early stages of COVID-19. Additionally, the report highlights the gaping holes in provincial legislative structures that provided guidance to municipalities during states of emergency that have been revealed to the public eye and the wide disparity between municipal governance cultures across Canada (Smit, et al. 2020, p. 42). The study focuses on four main goals:

- To capture limitations on municipal participatory governance at their most restrictive, early in the pandemic;
- To present some preliminary reflections about best practices and recommendations for municipal governance during states of emergency, in order to plan for future emergency periods, either future waves of COVID-19 or new emergencies;
- To illustrate the impact of limitations on participatory municipal governance during COVID-19 through the lens of one of the groups most deeply affected by these changes - BIPOC residents who are also suffering from what has been called the “second pandemic” — systemic racism;
- To provide the detail of challenges that the pandemic has presented during COVID-19 on provincial and territorial legislative frameworks on municipal states of emergency.

This particular report along with the interviews and other grey literature is used to examine public consultations pre- during and what to expect post-COVID-19.

### **Public Consultation in Pre-Pandemic Times**

The current consultation process used by the City of Toronto has some strengths that have worked for many years and provides a starting point for planners, facilitators and councillors to engage with the community. However, there needs to be work done to address the challenges of the current consultation process and the inequities brought by COVID-19 since March 2020.

Interviews with planners and councillors highlighted the strengths of community engagement practice in the City of Toronto. These methods and approaches are those they have utilized in previous planning studies and projects in their careers. The open house format is a common practice within public consultation where it is an information session before the presentation of a project followed by a period where community stakeholders can speak to councillors, planners, facilitators and anyone else who is involved in the project. One municipal planner suggests that she appreciates and “enjoy including an open house component because it provides that one on one or more intimate discussion time particularly in advance of the meetings”. This style of engagement is particularly used in public consultation to give an opportunity for residents to ask specific questions about the project to different individuals on the project team such as planners, architects, developers, and others. For this planner, “there might be a certain aspect to clarify about a proposal and then give them [residents] a sense of relief... that you've clarified that... [may] have concerns with what the applicant is proposing but at least they have the chance to feel like they're speaking to somebody and not being spoken to for the discussion”. This seems to be a common component for planners as they appreciate the one-on-one conversations that can take place in open house consultations. Additionally, another planner further suggested that an open house style gives “an ability for one on one discussion so people can individually need the proponents or the architect or planner or any other consultants etc., or talk to the Ward Councillor privately and again those discussions can occur before the meeting. Sometimes we do an open house format

before the actual meeting starts, we can walk people through display panel boards showing details of what's being proposed in that development and I always found that to be a very positive experience plus in an impersonal format”.

In pre-Covid-19 times, the majority of the public meetings took place in churches, school gyms, community centres and other community spaces in the neighbourhood. Location of public meetings was brought up in the interviews by councillors and planners as strengths as these spaces are familiar and in proximity to the residents. Planners and councillors insist on meeting the residents where they are at and engage them in the conversation of what is happening in their neighbourhood. Utilizing local and accessible spaces within the neighbourhood can promote engagement and increase participant attendance as these are spaces residents know or often visit. However, utilizing community spaces does not guarantee participation; therefore, efforts must be made to promote participation and interest for community members.

While the current consultation process provides opportunities for one-on-one conversations during open house public meetings; all planners and councillors interviewed raised the question of whose attending these meetings and oftentimes these public consultations attract the same crowd of individuals. It is clear that the same people continuously show up to council meetings, committee meetings, and public consultation meetings who bring forth their beliefs and opinions on projects and policies. Concerns for the lack of diversity of individuals at public meetings have been addressed in terms of tenure and age in the community. For instance, there were mentions that many of the crowds in public meetings are oftentimes elderly, over 50 years old, who own their homes and hardly any tenants and youth show up at these meetings. One planner spoke of public meeting notifications [in the form of an index card] in condominium buildings that “would go to each of the owners but if it's a rental building it may not and so we were not always capturing all of the residents”. This approach creates a divide between homeowners and renters in the neighbourhood, which in turn, creates inequitable outcomes for those who do not receive the notice of public consultation and cannot attend. The result is often a homogenous audience in

the public consultation who are property owners who will advocate for changes for their own best interest.

### **Public Consultation in Pandemic Times**

Due to COVID-19, many of the meetings on a provincial and municipal level moved online and emergency management by-laws allowed mayors and Municipal Chief Administrative Officer (CAO) to have sole power for decision-making. In the City of Toronto, the Council's role was limited to a consultative one with no voting rights as the final decision on many emergency actions were taken by the Mayor (Smit et al. 2020, p. 19). The Mayor could engage with City Councillors to better understand their perspectives but there is no information regarding if there was such engagement and how it took place and most importantly, the public was not informed to participate or watch these conversations. During COVID-19, many planning public consultation events were either cancelled altogether at the beginning of the pandemic or fundamentally altered. As health protocols demand, all events were transitioned into virtual platforms and have given full control to City staff to moderate the presentation and discussion portion of the meetings. Later in this section, the different alterations and changes that have been made to the public consultations are discussed and how they have affected the decision-making procedure for city planning.

The Windsor Law Centre for Cities (2020) report emphasizes the importance of public consultation and the lack of the process affecting all residents. It states that “vulnerable (including BIPOC) communities, who already tend to be underrepresented in elected municipal positions and therefore in decision-making, may be the most impacted. Decisions being made during the pandemic have different impacts for different communities, and it is very difficult for a mayor, or even an elected council, to fully appreciate these subtleties without the kinds of perspectives that come from public consultations” (Windsor Law Centre for Cities 2020, p. 27).

Since public consultation became virtual, there is a need for different strategies that ensure meaningful citizen participation. To achieve meaningful public consultation, the public first needs infrastructure and services provided to them in order to eliminate barriers to participation because not everybody is equally technologically fluent. Still,



even in a virtual environment, public consultation should be a space where diverse views and communities can directly influence decision-making in municipalities (Smit et al. 2020).

The shift to virtual platforms has strengths and challenges as it does for in-person meetings. Interviewed councillors and planners all saw the increase in the number of participants to virtual consultation as a strength. Although online meetings have created a digital divide between the haves and have nots, one planner states that the move to online meetings actually “helped to increase the numbers in terms of people who are attending the meeting” while recognizing that “everything being digital now, it's a little bit more difficult for some people”. Although virtual meetings may be a challenge for many individuals, the format has increased the number of people who may not have participated during in-person meetings due to language barriers and other time commitments. Most virtual platforms offer closed captioning which may facilitate the understanding of a presentation for people not fully fluent in English. Virtual platforms also give the option for individuals to join in through the phone and listen to the presentation even though they may not have visuals. For example, a planner stated that one individual reached out to say that she was able to join through her phone while tending to her children during dinner and bedtime and later had the opportunity to speak at the end. Virtual meetings allow residents to join in their own space and to do things around the house instead of sitting in a chair for two-three hours in a school gym or church in their neighbourhood or worst not being able to attend because of family commitments. It is important to note that meaningful participation calls for collaboration and discourse between all stakeholders through the entire process. Although some participants can appreciate listening in and instead of missing the presentation; however, this is not the goal of community engagement and public participation.

There are however significant barriers to participation during the pandemic times that were prevalent for both councillors and planners. One councillor mentions that limited access remains a key issue because the index card of the meeting notification only has the link to the meeting through the WebEx platform and no phone is provided on the information sheet. A planner noted that “some people don't have internet access

and that's a barrier... creating an internet divide. There should have been a phone you can call into these presentations so you get audio but no video.” As mentioned above, inadequate infrastructure and services, such as access to the internet and familiarity with WebEx platform and other tools used by the project team, creates a divide between ‘haves and have nots.’ Another planner echoed the issue of access and suggested that “the virtual part (public consultation) requires people to have access to the internet so that limits who can participate”.

Moreover, those who are able to join the meeting are limited in the ways they can participate. As suggested by a planner, virtual meetings give the city staff hosts control over who can speak and moderate the chat questions which was seen as ‘very organized’ and ‘great’; however, this was mentioned as a barrier by a councilor due to the fact that it creates a power imbalance between city staff and developers versus residents. The balance of power is obvious when residents are muted at all times and unmuted only to ask a question and muted right after leaving no opportunity for follow-up questions -- whereas city staff and developers are not muted and have control to speak in whenever they like. A councillor also stresses the moderation of the questions asked in the chat versus when someone asks a question in person. The questions in the chat are oftentimes combined with other similar questions and this process oftentimes does not address all the questions on their own and all participant voices are not heard.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed our everyday life in ways that we could not foresee and public consultation processes had to equally adapt to this sudden change. But whether in-person or virtual, community engagement and public participation remains a complicated process for many and most often an inadequate process for vulnerable populations with particular experiences of “interpersonal violence, structural violence, and historical harms” (Pinderhughes, Davis and Williams 2015).

## **7. Trauma-Informed Community Building and Engagement**

This section of the paper suggests a deeper and meaningful approach to community building and engagement through the trauma-informed community building

model (TICB). This model was developed by the BRIDGE Housing Corporation and the Health Equity Institute at San Francisco State University in 2011 through research that examined the health issues facing residents of four distressed public housing sites in the city. The model captures the types of engagement processes BRIDGE staff were practicing with communities based on the trauma-informed service approach. Furthermore, the model signifies working with communities can intersect with systems and institutions that can affect community health and well-being (Arena, Falkenburger and Wolin 2018). The research team included students and faculty members partnering with community stakeholders to conduct six community-based participatory research projects to better understand community health issues and create strategies to address them. It is also noted that in the research process, “trauma and healing practices have been central to both the methods and findings of this research” (Arena, Falkenburger and Wolin 2018: 3).

“Community trauma” can be defined for social groups or neighbourhoods who experienced “interpersonal violence, structural violence, and historical harms” (Pinderhughes, Davis and Williams 2015). Trauma-affected neighbourhoods and communities are those with a history of misrepresentation and being of marginalized backgrounds all of which resulted in chronic trauma in the later generations (Wilson, 1987). Low-income and marginalized communities have lived experiences of violence and poverty which ultimately stems from historic and structural strains of racism, sexism, oppression, disenfranchisement, isolation and power dynamics. Along with these stressors and lived trauma, some communities have a long history of being continuously ignored or disappointed by promises of improvement and community development. As a result, this leads to a lack of trust and transparency between community members and institutions and developers, and as Arena, Falkenburger and Wolin (2018, p. 1) contend, “[i]t is essential for community-building and engagement efforts to be realistic and transparent about new opportunities and to be truthful about what they are offering. This requires stakeholders to acknowledge these community-level traumas.” Furthermore, addressing community trauma and history through genuine collaboration can generate sustainable and viable outcomes for communities through changed policies, programs and institutional practices. Weinstein (2018)

emphasizes the importance of differentiating between individual and community trauma as the trauma-informed community building model is designed to address the implications of community trauma not address individual traumas. Although both traumas are not mutually exclusive and both are important to recognize, the two types of trauma require different methods of mitigation. The trauma-informed community building model is a holistic community engagement approach that collaborates and works with the needs of the community, understanding that “historical community trauma cannot be undone” (Weinstein 2018, p. 7).

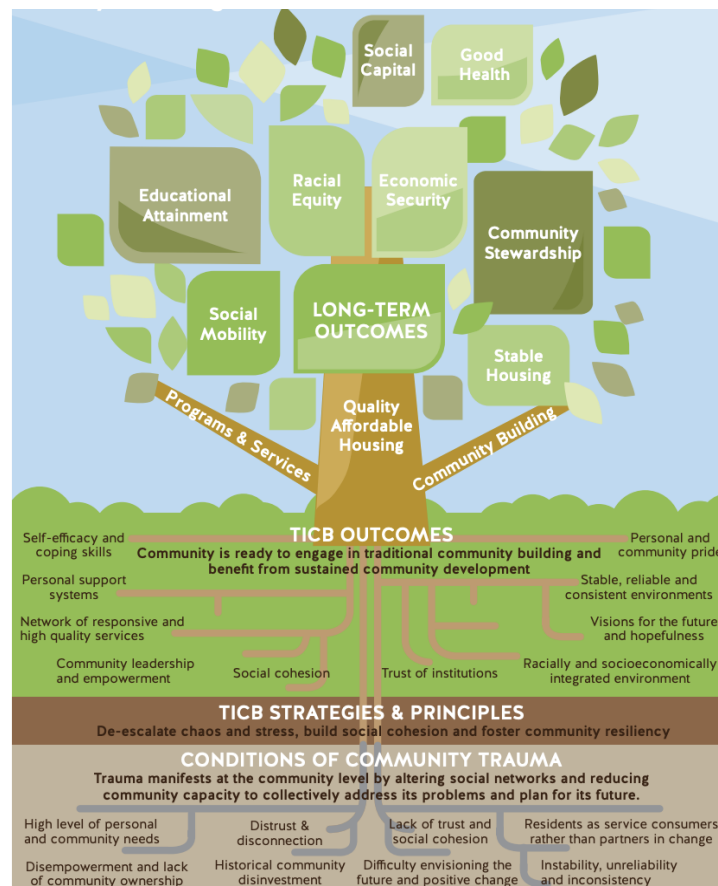
While traditional models of community building principles include residents and their participation in setting goals, communities who are trauma-affected may not have the affinity to gain the same opportunities as their counterparts in terms of investing in goals and strategies that impact their future (Naparsteck et al. 2007 as cited in Weinstein et al. 2014). Trauma-affected communities may not feel the same desires that regular communities do in terms of creating visions for their living standards, so these traditional community-building standards instead of helping the community are actually creating more barriers to change. It is also vital to note communities that have a decreased sense of social cohesion and lack of economic resources also provide a limitation in their want for change or bettering their circumstances (Wallerstein and Bernstein 1994). Members of trauma-affected communities will have difficulty participating in future planning or action towards a better future (Bloom and Sreedhar 2008). However, a trauma-informed community building method brings a collective understanding of these limitations within the community, understanding that social cohesion is not foremost on the mind and agenda of most residents in trauma-affected who are constantly struggling to cope with poverty or bad living standards.

Various principles are used in the trauma-informed community building method where there is not a direct form of trauma treatment but rather a more fluid method that is welcoming to all individuals of the community with respect. The trauma-informed community building method produced four key principles that all community leaders, organizers, or facilitators should follow to ensure a fair and respectable environment to treat trauma. The first principle is ‘do no harm’ in which facilitators should be aware of any mental health and trauma triggers that invoke any stress within the community and

provide any necessary support needed. This support should be granted for longevity rather than short-term support. The second principle is ‘acceptance’ which revolves around the need for accepting the situations of residents and acknowledging the ways in which communities are affected by trauma, the reality they face, and setting reachable long-term goals for the community. The third principle is ‘community empowerment’ which is the importance of inclusivity of all community members, those of whom were marginalized for generations and their voices were not recognized nor benefited in any way. The allowance for equitable voices to be heard is vital in trauma-informed community building because the process of engaging a community should start with the community and their control over decisions that impact them. The final principle in the trauma-informed community building method is the ‘reflective process’ allowing for facilitators, community leaders or organizers to reflect on present and future changes within the community. The needs of the community are always changing with generations and it is important to be ready to change or adapt if need be.

The trauma-informed community building and engagement method also articulates four necessary strategies that explain the various relationships between individuals and their environments. The first set of strategies is ‘individual’, which involves the acceptance of roadblocks one could face in influencing families and individuals engaging in community building. The key to involvement is accepting realistic and reachable goals for involvement in the community but also creating incentives or rewards that help individuals feel more inclined to involve themselves in community building. The second strategic level is ‘interpersonal’ which means creating safe, inclusive, and respectful spaces so individuals can positively interact with community-building organizers. This is important because it allows for individuals to feel safe enough to express feelings and concerns without the fear of backlash or judgement. This involves building relationships not only with community leaders but also with other individuals in the community enhances social cohesion. The third strategy occurs at the ‘community’ level, which involves the creation of opportunities for residents to participate and to be involved with decision making and receive benefits for invoking change in the community. There must also be opportunities to create more cohesion between residents with different income levels. Finally, the last strategy

culminates at the ‘system’ level, which ensures that the community work always reflects the needs and concerns of residents given that the overarching goal is to elevate the voices in the community, and to make sure they are voiced correctly. This strategy also involves developing long-term actions to address and alleviate trauma, promote justice, equity, and a healthy environment in the community – and always ensuring community leaders and organizers are prioritizing opportunities for growth and support for trauma-affected communities.



**Figure 5: Trauma-Informed Community Building Theory of Change**  
(Source: BRIDGE Housing 2014)

## **Implementation of Trauma-Informed Community Building Method in San Francisco, California**

In August of 2013, a pilot project was created and organized in communities in each of HOPE SF (2021) sites that is “an ambitious cross-sector initiative to transform San Francisco’s most distressed public housing sites into vibrant and healthy communities”. The project was created in an effort for community outreach and community building. To incentivize residents, organizers hired multiple local residents to their program but also provided significant incentives for more individuals from the community to be peer leaders as well. Any challenges, findings, and key takeaways from this project were later used to implement better strategies and approaches in another study of community outreach and community building in the Potrero neighbourhood in San Francisco. Past projects that used traditional methods for community outreach left the community and its residents untrusting in these types of research as for the most part residents felt less than human and felt like ‘lab rats’. Outside researchers would come into communities for one purpose only, the needs of their research, and would then leave afterwards to never return. As a result, many residents felt their resources and knowledge were extracted and exploited. Low-income and marginalized communities have often been researched to find what ‘the problem’ of the community is without necessarily bringing any solutions or improvements to their lives. This situation further perpetuates the idea that experts are the ones who provide solutions and communities are the problems needing to be fixed -- leaving the community feeling helpless and alone in their struggles once again. In order to address the overwhelming fear of researcher ‘takeover’, the steering committee of the pilot project was made up of more community stakeholders than researchers. As a result, the committee held most of the decision-making power and was representative of the community's voice.

After the pilot study was completed in 2013, another study was completed in the Potrero neighbourhood in 2016 and included over 650 residents. Various trauma-informed community building activities allowed the residents to be prepared to engage in traditional community-building activities and created a clear vision for community members to be involved in development and community building. The trauma-

informed community building model was used to ensure that the trauma-affected community was equipped with community development initiatives that were trauma-informed but also centred around the residents' needs. This project emphasizes social cohesion and community building because it was vital to break down barriers of public housing and their counterparts. Allowing for residents to feel comfortable in their safe spaces was important as it creates a more fulfilling environment where residents are not only comfortable but also proud of where they come from and who they are.

There were multiple successful community outreach activities done in the Potrero study including zumba dance classes, Monday Walking Club and the Potrero Gardening Club. All three activities articulated the same idea of community involvement and increased social cohesion. Table 3 lists the key indicators for community strengths -- and a key one refers to a racially and socioeconomically integrated community. The zumba dance activity that took place in the Potrero community center reflects this point. Taken place in December, it is said that residents were all wearing holiday costumes while dancing to various types of music and following the instructor's dance moves. Community residents -- mothers with their children, single women, families -- all joined a zumba dance class held in a community center. One resident mentioned "What I like about the class is that there's a real mix of people who come. They are all different ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds and groups. That's what I tell people about the class. It's the people's zumba" (Weinstein 2018). This activity, open to all residents of Potrero, shows a sense of community where everyone feels comfortable and safe enough to dance, wear costumes, and even bring their children to join. This was a clear indicator of a community's strength, i.e., the ability to come together and enjoy each other's company no matter their race or socioeconomic class.

Other activities such as the Monday Walking Club saw a clear indicator of a personal support system which is labelled in Table 3 as an indicator for community strength. The Walking Club involved residents from the public housing and surrounding areas joining on a morning walk every Monday. One resident has been going to this Walking Club for the past 7 years but couldn't participate one week as her feet were too swollen. Yet, it was noted that 'Mama' as this resident is called by



other residents participated in almost all community outreach activities. For many, the walk enables an array of conversations ranging from complaints of body pain, weight being lost, and friendly conversations.

Lastly, another great example of building community outreach was the Potrero Gardening Club in which a rocky hillside filled with trash was transformed into a beautiful garden that was the center of the community. On a Saturday afternoon, a group of 20 participants sit and listen as Steve, the garden manager, gives lessons on the garden and mulch care, engaging residents in conversations. Translators are also present to make these lessons accessible to residents who don't speak English. For many residents, the transformation of the community garden into a beautiful feature of their community brought a calming and relaxing atmosphere. This activity alone has multiple indicators of community strengths. Following Table 3, we see clear community leadership and empowerment with Steve and his work with the community garden and teaching other residents about the proper garden and harvesting care. We see social cohesion, translators being used to help those who don't speak the best English but still being a part of the conversation and activity. And a collective community pride arose with the transformation of what was once a trash-filled land to now a beautiful and bountiful garden. By creating a community garden, residents 'seeded' hope and a vision for the future of their community. A new reality was bestowed upon them; the desire for change and increased community involvement.

Community leadership and empowerment	Self-efficacy and coping skills	Social cohesion	Stable and reliable environments	Personal and community pride
Network of responsive and high-quality services	Personal support systems	Vision for the future and hopefulness	Trust of institutions	Racially and socioeconomically integrated environment

**Table 3: Indicators of Community Strengths**  
(Source: BRIDGE Housing, 2018)

### **Key Takeaways for Planners**

To effectively engage a community that was affected by trauma in its diverse forms, there are necessary steps involved to ensure involvement is equitable, secure, and accommodating to all concerns. Communities that have been historically underrepresented may not be willing to change as they were conditioned to believe their voices did not matter. It is the responsibility of community leaders and planners to create an environment where residents feel comfortable enough to engage in change. Low-income communities or communities with low-literacy rates are not being effectively engaged in the conversation that impacts their lives. Proper efforts are not being made by organizers, facilitators and planners to help these residents to feel secure and trusting of their own opinions and concerns. Fears of being misrepresented and misinterpreted are high in various communities, so much so that it inhibits residents from voicing their thoughts (with fear that they would be judged). Creating spaces where they feel comfortable is vital in engaging with trauma-affected communities. Language, income, and education barriers all provide a hindrance to engagement, and it is the responsibility of planners to go out of their way to break down said barriers if the end goal is equity, community engagement and social cohesion.

## **8. Conclusion**

Public participation is seen as a “good and ethical practice - the right thing to do” (Konsti-Laakso and Rantala 2018, p. 1041). Breaking down barriers and challenges for individuals to meaningfully engage in projects and developments in their community is important work and efforts must be made to shift the planning process into an inclusive and accessible engagement process. As mentioned earlier, cities like Toronto have diverse communities in various ways such as socioeconomic status, employment status, immigration status, gender, race, religion and many more intersectionalities that make up unique lived experiences. A community can be defined in many different ways and can be constructed (and therefore reconstructed) through narratives, discourses and interests (Stewart and Lithgow 2015). The COVID-19

pandemic has shown how our everyday life can be suddenly transformed or exacerbated – but also how we became dependent on virtual community spaces as many in-person resources, tools and community services spaces were suddenly closed.

This Major Paper has reviewed the outreach and engagement approaches the City of Toronto uses during their planning studies and development projects. The methods were then analyzed through a case study, TOcore Planning Downtown, to conceptualize the implementation of engagement and participation methods. This research also provided a best practice from San Francisco on how to engage with communities who experienced trauma through the trauma-informed community building model. Toronto is home to many individuals with lived experiences with poverty, violence, discrimination and lack of trust in public institutions. For planners to educate themselves and develop a trauma-informed approach is essential when working with vulnerable and marginalized populations.

The insight of planners and councillors along with literature suggest that planning a public consultation is vital yet a challenging task. There are multiple factors to take into account as each neighbourhood is different therefore, engagement will inevitably be different. This paper suggests that planners and councillors must ensure that efforts are made to encourage civic participation and eliminate barriers to community participation. Furthermore, the City of Toronto must revisit the current community engagement methods and programs in place to ensure they are creating entries for participation and not creating impediments to neighbourhood governance. This research project had limitations and challenges as it was conducted during the pandemic and access to planners, councillors and residents was limited for interviews. The next steps for this research project would be to practice and implement the concept of trauma-informed community building model and equity placemaking in Toronto neighbourhoods.

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