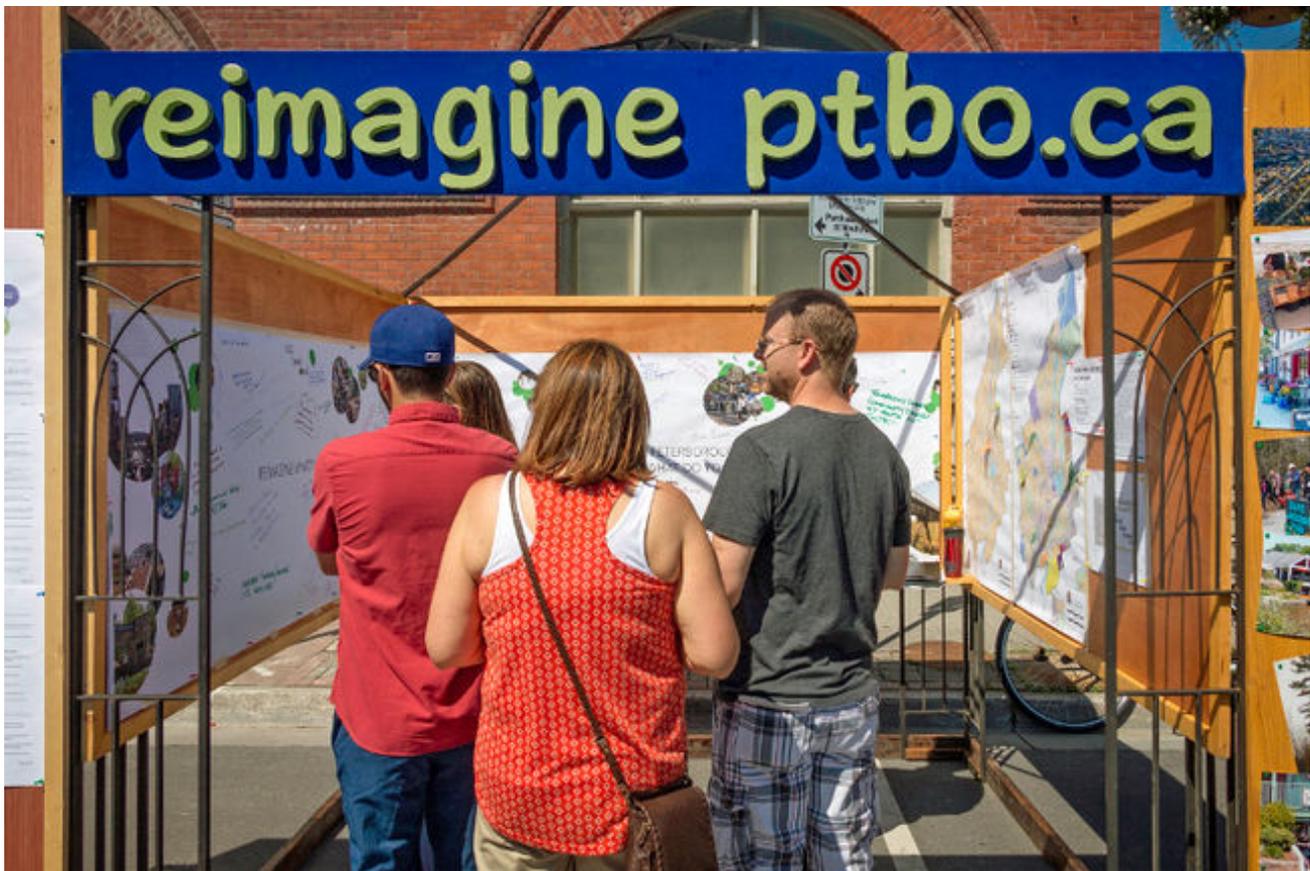




Inviting The City Of Peterborough Into Better Public Engagement?

By BEN WOLFE, Reimagine Peterborough
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Reimagine Peterborough celebrated its first anniversary with a display on George Street during Peterborough Pulse, the city's Open Streets festival held July 16. Hundreds of people stopped at the booth to share their dreams and ideas for the future of the city. public on questions like these, and to design a new and potentially transformative Official Plan for Peterborough's next several decades. SPECIAL TO THE PETERBOROUGH EXAMINER

Peterborough is entering into some welcome and interesting experiments in public engagement. There is a sense in the air, especially around senior staff including new planning director Jeff Humble and chief administrative officer Allan Seabrooke, of a genuine wish to do better.

There is nowhere that this matters more than in the community conversation over the next year about our new Official Plan.

The timeline for the plan has changed repeatedly. And that's a good thing. It needs and deserves the extra time. And creating the city's most important guiding document is the best possible place to invite, lead and model a 21st century community conversation.

Reimagine Peterborough has some suggestions for making the process better. We've offered them, and to be fair they are being heard and considered as you read this.

1. Rename the process

The work that's just been rebooted should be renamed to make it clear that this isn't just an ordinary review of the Official Plan. It's a once-in-a-generation rewrite. It is a declaration of principles and vision for the city for at least the next 20 years.

Anyone who thinks this work is routine or boring needs to understand at a glance that they are opting out of possibly the most important thing currently happening at City Hall.

2. Strip away the dead weight of formality

It's a wonderful thing that the city has created a working group to advise this effort, and invited a wide range of knowledgeable and committed people to participate. We are on that list, and glad to be.

And, not much will happen if advisory meetings and public conversations are constrained by the dead weight of council-like procedure and formality. All that structure might be useful when it's time for votes and formal decisions. Right now, it is a barrier to skilled and interested people forming relationships, listening, learning from each other, mixing and developing ideas and widening the circle.

The council chambers are suited to working under rules of procedure. They are one of the worst rooms in the city for participatory dialogue.

3. Make public engagement a sixth theme of the plan

Citizen expectations of public participation have changed. For city staff, the traditional model was "We are the experts, and we are tasked with the responsibility. We should not release this until we have fully done our work and made our recommendation."

The risk is that the public now experiences that as: "You have kept us all in the dark

until it is too late." And sometimes, you have asked entirely the wrong question.

Work on the plan so far has five well-chosen themes, that reflect community input six years ago. Our shorthand for them is how we live, move, grow, green and prosper.

One of the most meaningful things the city could do to show it is determined to make this plan reflect the voice and vision of the community is to recognize open and genuine public engagement as the 6th guiding theme of the process.

4. Name the challenges, and the new directions

So far, Peterborough is at the stage of proposing a series of guiding principles for the new plan. The public is about to be asked to comment on them. They are decent and comprehensive enough as a list of topics.

But in many cases it is not clear from them what challenges we need to face, or what values will guide our choices. It is only sometimes clear what policy direction we are being asked to move in. The world is changing. The core of our current plan dates from 1981 -- which is why it has become so inadequate to guide us.

The City of London opens its new plan with a provocative, well-researched and expressed list of challenges the City must face, that make old ways of thinking and working inadequate to the next generation.

Their list includes, to give a few examples, managing the costs of urban sprawl, the growing seniors population, the different preferences of millennials (including a strong trend to urban rather than suburban living), the central importance of transit, the shift of the economy away from manufacturing, housing affordability, protecting surrounding farmland, and -- by no means last -- the many effects of climate change.

It's a local list, and not a perfect match for our needs. But what matters is the way these challenges were considered and are reflected in every decision in the Plan, after being part of public conversation for a year.

The list of challenges is followed by a statement of values -- collaborative, inclusive, accountable public engagement is one of the highest -- and then a chapter called Our Strategy. It names the plan's key directions in easily accessible language.

We are excited by current shifts. They are only some of the hopeful signs. We offer these simple things that could be done, in the near future, to signal that this process really is different, more inclusive and more creative than past public engagements.

Ben Wolfe is a local and international community-builder and communicator, and one of the founders of Reimagine Peterborough.

This is the sixth in a series of columns from Reimagine, a citizen-led movement that sees better urban planning and public engagement as essential to our social, cultural, democratic, and quality of life needs. Follow the group at ReimaginePtbo on Facebook and Twitter, and at reimagineptbo.ca.

This is the sixth in a series of columns from Reimagine Peterborough, a citizen-led movement to invite the incredible potential within our city to come together to create, share, and engage on a city plan for a brighter future. Join and follow us on our Facebook page, Twitter, or reimagineptbo.ca