



Reimagine Peterborough proposes a sixth theme for the city's new Official Plan

By TODD BARR/Guest Columnist
Thursday, October 26, 2017 1:34:20 EDT AM



A sampling of comments left by local residents at the Reimagine Peterborough booth at Pulse in July. SPECIAL TO THE PETERBOROUGH EXAMINER

More and more people are living in cities - a shared geographic, public, and cultural space where good things and challenging things happen.

When the challenging things happen - like poverty, violence against women, addiction, poor mental health, and climate change (and corresponding planning and development

issues) - we often look to our governments for help. With cities at the forefront, this role is increasingly played by our municipal governments.

But City Hall can't do it alone. Engaging residents, voluntary groups, nonprofit organizations and businesses in public policy development is essential when responding to complex community challenges.

A recent example is the action taken by a small group of residents responding to the opioid emergency on Toronto's streets - one that is taking lives. Frustrated by a lack of government action, volunteer harm-reduction workers took it upon themselves to open a pop-up safe drug injection site inside a tent in downtown Toronto's Moss Park.

This pop-up site forced local government to listen to voices of the community, which triggered government action. City of Toronto officials are now working with residents, local health clinics and the province to set up permanent safe injection sites because the pop-up site demonstrated that by providing drugs safely, lives are saved and emergencies are prevented. Saving lives can lead to other opportunities like education, social supports, counselling, employment and housing. Opportunities that all fellow residents should have access to. This approach to collaborative public policy development has also saved thousands of healthcare dollars.

In Peterborough, how do we collectively prevent these kinds of challenging issues from developing or getting worse? Through a once-in-a-generation opportunity to shape the City of Peterborough's Official Plan. This is a legally binding plan that will shape our choices about the neighbourhoods, natural areas, roads, trails, social services, shopping, job creation and taxes we want for the next 20 years.

As part of the current Official Plan Review, the city recently posted an online survey about the proposed five themes for the Plan. Public engagement was not one of them.

Reimagine Peterborough continues to advocate that the Official Plan Review must include a sixth theme of Open and Genuine Public Engagement. This theme would elaborate the principles and policies around public consultation and decision-making, and aim to develop a more inclusive, open and dynamic dialogue between City Hall and residents, voluntary groups, nonprofit organizations and businesses. The result: building better-informed and more consensus-oriented public policy.

As a sixth theme of the Official Plan Review, the city and others could explore the possibilities for public consultation designs that are more inclusive, open and less cumbersome and draining on staff, Council, and residents' time. Indeed, the tradition of one microphone and one speaker at a time necessarily excludes broader forms of public engagement.

[As discussed in David Goyette's Oct. 12 Peterborough Examiner column](#), the current ways of engaging with City Hall can be trying and confusing, yet the citizens who speak at council "[p]lay an exceptionally important role in helping to balance out city councillor reliance on the opinions of city staff."

At minimum, reforming city council's procedures to make information and discussion more inclusive and accessible - including more time for the public to understand and engage with issues before they are considered at city council - would go a long way towards better dialogue.

With so many public services being 'downloaded' to Municipalities without additional funding, local governments must rely increasingly on businesses, nonprofit partners, voluntary civic organizations, and residents to support, research, advocate for, propose, implement and monitor policies and services.

A sixth theme of Open and Genuine Public Engagement would also reflect, round-out and give further shape to the council-approved strategic framework for the City of Peterborough 2016-2019. Public engagement would be established not only for plan-making, but also for Official Plan implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The approaches, tools and spectrum of public participation endorsed by the International Association for Public Participation (Canada) provides some useful starting points.

This would also help the City fulfill new requirements for public engagement policies in a municipality's Official Plan, as set out in Bill 73 that came into effect July 1, 2016, including the practical elements of:

- Setting out public consultation in the Official Plan;
- Appointing at least one citizen to a Municipal Planning Committee;
- Effective consultation between a Municipality and its citizens.

As the first Official Plan Review since 1981 happens, Reimagine Peterborough believes this is our opportunity to do things differently. It's an opportunity for us to come together and shape our city through authentic, inclusive and respectful community engagement - through the Official Plan and beyond.

This is the ninth in a series of columns from Reimagine Peterborough, a citizen-led movement that sees better urban planning and public engagement as essential to our social, cultural, democratic, and quality of life needs. For updates, follow Reimagine Peterborough on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), at reimagineptbo.ca, and join [our mailing list](#).