

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT: VANCOUVER AND SURREY

Community Consultations

Many of us have gone to city-sponsored open houses, community meetings, public hearings, or even spoken at Council meetings. We may also have been on a focus group, or filled out a survey. These are all ways cities get public input on policies and actions.



Outreach

Cities try to hear as many voices as possible. They use on-line surveys, like Talk Vancouver and CitySpeaks in Surrey, to gather ideas from citizens. They host events in parks, at malls, and in other places where people gather. Sometimes they conduct their outreach in different languages. They may also focus on particular groups, like Indigenous residents, newcomers, youth, and seniors to get their ideas.

But is everyone's voice heard equally? Do all citizens have an equal chance to have their say? And if they do give the city their ideas, are they able to find out what effect they had? As it turns out, the answer to these questions is often "no."

How can cities do better at including people who tend to be left out?

- ✔ Cities can collect information from people who take part in surveys and outreach events. This can include their age, gender, income level, if they are LGBTQ, what neighbourhood they live in, and what language they speak at home. Cities can use this information to get an idea of who they are reaching, and what groups are missing.
- ✔ Cities need to be creative when they design outreach activities. Some common approaches, like open houses and on-line surveys, may seem like they are open to everyone. But not everyone is comfortable coming to an event where a lot of information is presented. This is particularly true if English is not your first language, translation is not offered, there is a lot of jargon, or materials are not clearly written. On-line surveys work well for people who have a computer and internet access. But others may not have those things or the time it takes to complete a survey.

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- ✔ Cities should design ways to reach diverse women, in particular. They should not assume that an approach will work equally well for men and women. Newcomer women, Indigenous women, and women from some cultural or religious communities may need different approaches in order to feel safe when participating. Some might prefer to meet in their own neighbourhoods, or in women-only spaces. Mothers might need childcare or events designed to enable both parents and children to take part.
- ✔ Cities should think about how best to let people know how their input is used and how it has influenced city policies. Being inclusive and having people “at the table” is not enough. Participants need to see that their ideas are making it to the level where decisions are made. Otherwise, people may not trust that their input makes any difference and stop taking part in city outreach activities.
- ✔ City staff need to keep up with the latest and most effective approaches in public engagement. There are always new ideas about how best to reach groups who are not heard from as loudly or as often as others. Cities need to ask those who participate how an event or a survey could be improved to be more welcoming and inclusive



CANADIAN RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF WOMEN
INSTITUT CANADIEN DE RECHERCHES SUR LES FEMMES



Photos: Participants at the Women Shaping Surrey summit in February 2020



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