

ReThink London: A Year-Long Conversation on the Future of a City

Image



Lessons from the most successful public engagement in Canadian municipal history

Rethinking a city's entire official plan is a once-in-a-career opportunity for many planners. Some never get the chance.

When the City of London, Ontario began the process two years ago — a complete rewrite of a plan originally approved in 1989 — its planning team set out to accomplish something few cities have imagined or tried. Putting the topic on the public's lips, making it a subject of wide discussion, and emerging with a clear consensus on a shared vision.

The result was the most successful public engagement process in Canadian municipal history, full of lessons about what other communities can make possible.

The first step was facing a reality London planner John Fleming called “the elephant in the room.” People don’t come to public meetings on a 20-year planning horizon for their city. They don’t relate to planning in that way.

Holding traditional planning meetings at city hall sends a message that the content “must be bureaucratic, legalistic, or political in nature,” John has written.

“And, the term public meeting has its own connotations that conjure images of long boring presentations followed by an hour or more of comments by the same small group of people who have been involved in these discussions for years. Why would an average Londoner attend such an event?”

So London’s team did it differently, with a multi-part strategy for breaking through the noise and making the process count.

First, they branded the discussion with an approachable name that cut through planning jargon to the essence of what they aimed to do: ReThink London. ReThink London launched with an attention-getting, media-savvy public event. 1,300 people filled two convention centre ballrooms to hear Peter Mansbridge give a talk about seizing the moment, and what it’s like to report from places where it is not possible to exercise the privilege of citizenship.

The launch began a year-long community conversation, with anyone who would take part. Municipalities typically hold four public meetings as part of a planning process. London held 80.

A few were of the traditional style. 75 were open-ended workshops and discussions with groups of citizens all over the city, on their own terms, in places and groups where they already gather.

There were many other creative approaches. Planning staff came to summer festivals and asked people what they do and don’t like about the city. They created an online “visual preference survey” that let people share and comment on photos of their most and least favourite places.

Two leading Canadian urbanists, Brent Toderian and Ken Greenberg, were brought in to share their expertise on the most promising approaches tried by other cities.

Urban designer Sean Galloway, the co-lead of the public engagement process, ran an event at a public library, live-streamed over cable TV to groups at multiple other branches, that used a Canadian Idol style approach and voting software called PollEverywhere to gather opinions from over 500 participants. “I felt like Peter Mansbridge that night,” he chuckles.

Even more importantly, starting well before the public launch, the planning team nurtured a team of community champions — leaders and connectors in neighbourhoods, ethnic communities, and constituencies of many other kinds — and this opened the door to conversation in important places.

For example, community champions engaged members of the southeast Asian community whose life history gave them good reasons to be skeptical of meetings with government.

And 150 people attended a richly successful workshop at a homeless shelter.

To focus the conversation the city found straightforward ways to show what was at stake. The most effective was putting a 50-year price tag on more and less sprawling patterns of development. A lot of people, including the business community and those interested in fiscal responsibility started paying attention when they learned a compact form of development is projected to cost \$2.7 billion less in public infrastructure and \$70 million less a year in operating costs than a “business as usual” growth pattern for the same population.

Meanwhile, a compact city will also use less energy, have better air quality, better mobility, better health, and protect the top-quality agricultural land surrounding London.

More than 15,000 people have engaged with ReThink London. There is a new level of interest in, and knowledge of, urban issues, and the public engagement process has shaped the priorities and language of the draft plan.

“It gives strength to the final product,” Sean says. “This is democracy at work. Politicians are saying they should wrap the budget process around it. The business community is saying we’ve got to do this.”

People haven’t traditionally come to public meetings on a 20-year planning horizon for their city — but over 400 people attended the public release of London’s draft

plan in late May. Video links had to be set up to two rooms of overflow seating. The planning team received a standing ovation, from both politicians and residents.

The result, Sean says, is that “When it comes time for implementation, you’ve already poured the foundation for the community’s involvement.”

This article is the second in a series on ReThink London and The London Plan. Part 1 is here: [The London Plan: A Message From the Future of Planning in Canada](#).

Coming next:

3: An official plan written in human

4: The London Plan: first of a new generation?

It is also part of a larger Axiom News look at urban issues and local government in Canada including these related stories:

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