THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS IN NEIGHBOURHOOD PLANNING:

A SNAPSHOT OF THE LITERATURE AND CASES

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1. Overview

In the last decade, increased pressures on municipalities have prompted them to rethink about how they go about planning and revitalizing neighbourhoods. One aspect of this rethinking has been the growing comeback of 'community councils'. There are many reasons for this comeback – constraints on budgets, demands for greater government transparency and accountability, and desires to involve communities in decisions, among many others factors. Municipalities both in Canada and internationally are experimenting with different ways of formally working with communities through such councils as part of a strategy to address current and future challenges.

To understand this renewed interest in community collaboration, this paper explores academic literature and practical examples of community council involvement in neighbourhood planning. A central aim of this review is to consider the feasibility of adopting community councils in the City of Ottawa as part of the recently launched 2006 Neighbourhood Planning Initiative (NPI). This involves posing four questions: Why is there a renewed interest in community councils? What are community councils? What issues affect community councils? And how are community councils relevant for NPI?

2. Community Council Context

Why is there a renewed interest in community councils?

The role of community involvement in planning neighbourhoods has varied considerably during the last thirty years. We might argue that neighbourhood planning, particularly through the more formal role of community councils, has now come full circle. In the 1970s infrastructure and other land-use projects focused on community involvement in the revitalization of 'deprived neighbourhoods' primarily through area-based approaches focusing on local policy making and implementation (Pearce and Mawson, 2003). We saw this approach through the Community Development Programs in the United Kingdom and the Neighbourhood Improvement Programs in Canada in the early 1970s. The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a sharp policy shift toward planning that was focused on market

mechanisms and so were not very participatory. Authors such as Colenutt and Cutten (1994: 237, quoted in Raco, 2000), for instance, suggest that "during the course of the 1980s, policy became refocused not on people and communities but on property and physical regeneration". But, as resources became increasingly constrained in the 1990s, there was a resurgence of community involvement through the focus on partnerships as a policy construct for municipal initiatives. Raco (2000) notes, however, that the trend toward partnerships has been less about responding to community-led or bottom-up thinking but rather more about government funding programs leaning on competitive mechanisms in order to envision some local representation in the process. However rather than a single cause, community engagement probably more reflects a number of interests including the 'place based' principles of the 70s, the practical partnerships of the 90s, and the infrastructure renewal and development of the 80s.

Community councils also seem to fit in with the broader ebb and flow of metropolitan trends which have often been described as the 'local government modernization agenda'. This agenda can be grouped into three broad themes:

▪ **Modernizing cities and public services:** This echoes reforms in other levels of government toward 'new public management' to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of public organizations. Key aspects of this modernization include decentralization, public-private partnerships, citizen-focused services, greater attention to performance, and stronger governance and accountability systems among others. One prominent trend of this management approach is to amalgamate cities to benefit from greater efficiencies on services and programs (e.g. Ottawa, Montreal, and Toronto).

  While there continues to be mixed reviews on the 'modernization' of local government, and particularly amalgamation, community councils can be seen as a way of easing some of the centralizing headaches of amalgamation and devolving some of the responsibilities of local governments.

▪ **Democratic renewal:** With declining voter numbers, Western countries have taken concerted efforts in recent years to help reconnect citizens to local governments. The

United Kingdom published several papers in the late 1990s on how to encourage greater interest in democratic engagement. Canada has taken similar moves, particularly at the provincial level with British Columbia, Prince Edward Island, and Ontario taking the lead.

Community councils may facilitate the involvement of citizens in decision making processes. This engagement may not only lead to higher quality local services but also to greater interest in other levels of government. This is consistent with the traditional concept of local government as a training ground for democracy.

- **Building the community:** Capacity development, local ownership and the participation of "primary stakeholders" or "beneficiaries" are regarded as essential to ensuring for the long-term success of decentralization and other public sector reforms (Pearce and Mawson, 2003). Underpinning this driver is the premise that by 'enabling capacity' it may help communities to figure out their own problems through effectively meeting their own needs (Sullivan, 2003). This might, in time, contribute to what Robert Putnam refers to as 'social capital' or the social networks, norms and organizations shaping the individual and collective well-being of society (Putnam, 2000). Community councils would be a logical 'enabler' of this capacity.

Moreover, the recent developments and agendas in this field have helped to frame what governments, practitioners and academics now refer to as 'community governance' or 'neighbourhood management'. Clarke and Stewart (1994, quoted in Sullivan, 2003) suggest that community governance has emerged out of three ideas: securing the 'well-being' of communities, partnering with others to meet various needs and safeguard well-being, and identifying new ways of communicating with citizens so that 'collective choice' as well as 'voice' may be practiced. Neighbourhood management, on the other hand, is seen as a tool of community governance to help assess the motivation of residents, organize neighbourhood groups, initiate forums, fundraise, and to promote the neighbourhood among other things (Keil, 2006). Thus, the growing interest in community councils may also be linked to the ways that they can provide a useful meeting point for these conceptual and practical perspectives to take shape.

What are community councils?

Community councils are generally understood as a group of people working with local governments and other public bodies to determine, coordinate, express and represent the views of the community it represents. Interpretations of community councils vary so it is helpful to emphasize the key features of them with a few examples.

First, in many cases, community councils have a legislative mandate. In the United Kingdom, for instance, community, parish and town council activities are controlled by Acts of Parliament. Community councils are there to provide the space between local authorities and local communities and to improve authority awareness of specific views and preferences of the communities that they serve (National Association of Local Councils, 2006). Currently, there are 10,000 such councils in England and Wales. Powers of the councils include street lighting, crime reduction, public transportation, leisure facilities, footpaths and more. There is similar legislation and responsibilities in Scotland for 1,200 community councils except that Scotland grants fewer responsibilities to the councils. As such, they are run on a voluntary basis rather than as a statutory requirement. For instance, councils in England and Wales can provide feedback on planning processes, such as land use, as "statutory consultees" whereby local governments must consult with them. Councils can also participate and be represented at public inquiries (NACL, 2006).

As a result of amalgamation, the Cities of Montreal and Toronto respectively have created borough and community councils. Montreal's 19 borough councils, made official through January 2006 legislation, have jurisdiction and power over such local issues as urban planning, waste collection, culture, recreation, roads, housing and financial management (City of Montreal, 2006). The City of Toronto Act, 1997 established community councils as a way to provide a forum for local feedback into City Council's decision-making processes. After some changes in 2003, the City now works with four community councils which are generally responsible for making recommendations to City Council on local planning and neighbourhood issues such as traffic plans, parking regulations and exemptions to specific City bylaws (City of Toronto, 2006). Borough councils, while very new, have the potential to exercise influence and power compared to the more consultative focused community councils in Toronto.

At the outset, it is important to distinguish these community councils from voluntary or community-based organizations working on social planning and development. These groups tend to be more issues based or focus on a well-defined 'community' or membership. Therefore, 'community' does not necessarily need to be defined by ward boundaries but in other ways such as working with disabled people, Aboriginal peoples, those affected by violence and others. For example, the Community Social Planning Council of Greater Victoria aims to improve the quality of life for those living in the capital region, particularly disadvantaged groups (Web site, 2006). Similarly, the Edmonton Social Planning Council, for instance, is currently working with the Federation of Canadian Municipalities to explore the local and national dimensions of inclusion (Web site, 2006). Another example is Community Living British Columbia, a voluntary organization which is currently trying to create a "community council" as a way of bringing together diverse voluntary sector groups working on disability issues (Web site, 2006).

Second, legislated community councils are comprised of democratically elected or nominated representatives. Election processes often vary. For instance in Montreal, communities elect their 'borough representatives' at the same time as traditional councillors and the mayor (City of Montreal, 2006). It can be more ad hoc in the UK. In Scotland, for instance, community councillors can be elected at the same time as local authority elections or through other voting arrangements such as being elected at public meetings (Government of Scotland, 2006). While there is quite a lot of detail on the mapping of the community councils, there is surprisingly little information about how one goes about becoming a member of one. It seems, however, that potential candidates need to apply for community council positions and then be "approved" by the City. Also, it is not immediately clear what this appointment process really entails and what ways members 'represent' their communities.

3. Critical Issues

The literature and documentation on the role of community councils in municipal planning is extremely sparse, particularly in Canada. Consequently, we draw upon broader community development experiences to identify a handful of critical issues affecting them. We approach this task by considering how strong community councils might work. For instance, effective community councils:

- **Represent community interests:** 'Representation' can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, it can be seen as the proportional reflection of the community (i.e. ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status etc). The election process of community councils, like other democratic processes, could help or hinder this proportionality. On the one hand, it might encourage those unlikely to campaign for City Council to run for a smaller, less time intensive community council. On the other hand, the most vocal or the ones with the 'right' credentials, as in the case of appointments in the City of Toronto, may or many not 'represent' community interests. A second way of interpreting 'representation' is to think about how responsive members are in attending meetings, public events, gathering community feedback etc. Thus, the former interpretation is more about 'demographic' representation while the latter is more about 'professional' representation.

- **Provide 'logic' to the community:** The effectiveness of community action rests to an extent on a degree of order that exists within the community. This can be understood with the interplay of three 'logics' (Baum, 2003 quoted in Wilson, 2005). For instance, a 'logic of participation' encourages communities to get involved as democratically as possible. Baum sees that focusing on openness and inclusion will prevent the exclusion of others. The 'logic of action' stems from 'participation'. This 'logic' is premised on getting things done based on the resources available. The final 'logic' which often competes with 'action' is the 'logic of research' to gather and assess community feedback.

    The United Kingdom, for instance, has tried to evaluate the 'quality' of parish and community councils starting in 2003. The 'Quality Town and Parish Scheme' aims to provide minimum baseline standards to enable these groups to better represent the

communities they serve. The community councils must demonstrate that they have met certain standards through passing several tests such as: electoral mandate, council meetings, accounts and code of conduct and others (National Association of Local Councils, 2006). By passing the tests, community councils can gain further responsibilities from local authorities. There are no such measurement tools for Canadian cases as of yet.

- **Find sustainable funding:** The issue of financing is always a contentious one During the Neighbourhood Improvement Programs in Ottawa, for instance, "mini councils" were established to facilitate a number of neighbourhood studies. Once the project funding collapsed, however, these councils, like many other voluntary groups disappeared. Watt suggests that short-term and fragmented funding can lead to misguided initiatives, duplication and can make little sense to the communities these groups are trying to represent (Watt, 2000).

  The English and Welsh cases allow and appear to encourage community councils to fundraise. Councils can also apply for a precept on local taxes (NACL, 2006). The 'precept' does not seem to apply in Scotland or the Canadian examples in Toronto and Montreal. These conditions are significant because the nature of the funding relationship is likely to have considerable influence on the power dynamics between communities, City Councillors and civil servants. For instance, Wilson asserts that in some cases civil servants need to get approval from community representatives to get access to earmarked funds. This can be both empowering for communities but could also be a source of frustration for professional staff (Wilson, 2005).

- **Work on the 'inside' and 'outside'**: In addition to their role as a pressure group, community councils can also operate as part of the local municipal government. This dual role is a characteristic that distinguishes them from other voluntary sector organizations. Thus, while community councils can challenge local authorities, they are also expected to strive for good working relations with City Councils and other forms of the governance structure. Needless to say, this is a delicate and difficult balance to achieve.

4. Final Reflections

This short paper has highlighted the underlying context for community councils, identified some examples in Canada and internationally, and discussed some critical issues linked to them. Given this exploration, we can conclude with a few final recommendations on the relevance of the community council model for the City of Ottawa and more specially the NPI demonstration project. In particular, we recommend that the City of Ottawa:

- Learn from 'best practices' from the cases we have mentioned here and others. This would involve learning both at the city staff and community levels.
- Only consider community councils as a sustainable initiative, rather than a one-off event motivated by the NPI project. A policy framework or legislative process would be necessary to give the councils some staying power.
- For the councils to be sustainable, they would need some secure, long-term funding. This would involve allowing for fundraising and perhaps, as in England and Scotland, the lever to finance local initiatives through the tax system.
- Like other forms of political representation, community councils should be representative and transparent to the communities they serve. The formation of them could coincide with city-wide elections, for instance.
- Finally, establishing community councils may improve citizen engagement and effective municipal land use and services but this will involve stronger collaboration, collaboration, coordination and partnership within the City and with community organizations.

Further, a number of questions emerged from this discussion that the City of Ottawa will need to consider. For instance, to whom are community representatives accountable? How should they work with City Councillors? How should such representatives be appointed and funded? How should they be assessed? And how can communities get rid of representatives if they are disappointed with them? On all these fronts, much more thinking is needed on these issues and others if the City of Ottawa is to build on the enthusiasm generated by the NPI demonstration project.

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