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FEEDBACK ON THE HOUSING POLICY PUBLIC PARTICIPATION PROGRAM

from

The Edmonton Social Planning Council

The Edmonton Social Planning Council would like to commend the Research and Long Range Planning Branch for its intent to obtain input from the citizens of Edmonton in relation to housing policy. Effective citizen participation in policy development is a significant factor which makes policies both acceptable to the public and relevant to its needs. Importantly, citizen participation can at least foster early identification of conditions which may lead to social problems. This implies a long term cost saving in relation to problem prevention and reduced conflict over adopted policies.

Although the intention was good, the Social Planning Council feels that the process utilized was generally ineffective in terms of fostering citizen input into planning housing policy for the City of Edmonton. The following factors have been considered.

(A) Time Constraints

Six weeks allocated to the entire public participation program hardly seems adequate in terms of obtaining input from a population of one-half million. We recommend that at least six months be allocated to a public participation program regarding any policy. In addition, the appropriate time allotment for the participation program should be related to the kind of policy being developed. Some issues may be more complex than others. The housing policy for the City of Edmonton is a case in point. Here, more than six months is more likely an appropriate length of time for effective public participation.

(B) Timing

The period of the year at which the participation program takes place is critical. The housing policy public participation program occurred at a favorable time (September to November). September to April, excluding the Christmas and New Year period, appears to be the period when most residents are available for public participation programs.

(C) Program Planning

An adequate period of time should be allocated to planning for the most effective participation program strategies. Although a Technical Advisory Committee was established to advise on the public participation process and comment on questionnaires, agendas, and material for public meetings, the major parameters of the program (time, broad strategy, discussion paper) had previously been established without consultation with the Advisory Committee or the public. Preplanning which includes establishing goals and objectives and alternative strategies involves a considerable period of time and might benefit from input from a variety of sources (public, consultants). In addition, the Advisory Committee, besides reacting to already established parameters, had insufficient pre-meeting warning and only four to six meetings at which to advise on the program.

(D) Analysis Period

The length of time between presentation of the discussion paper and reaction by the public was far too brief (approximately two weeks). Groups and individuals must be given a longer period of time to organize, research, synthesize thoughts, develop alternatives and express them. Given that it required approximately three years to develop the Housing in Edmonton policy, such a short period of time to analyze the report is entirely inadequate. Evidently, many people declined to respond because they felt they could not competently judge quite so quickly. A two months minimum is recommended for an analysis period.

### (E) Reactive Process

The housing policy citizen participation program was reactive in the sense that the policy was presented for public reaction, but there is no indication that public input from community groups and organizations was invited over the policy development period. This kind of input is recommended as a method of obtaining more public input in relation to creation of the policy at an early stage as opposed to reaction to developed and recommended policy.

### Discussion Paper

The discussion paper was a "popularized version" of the larger report. As such, it was deficient in information as compared to the larger report Housing in Edmonton, Directions for the Future. This was unfortunate since it makes reference to a policy few people know about. The discussion paper did not indicate possible housing policy alternatives designed to solve housing problems. This is recommended for inclusion in future papers. The format was not interesting. This could be improved so that the document is interesting to look at and to read (e.g., cartoon, illustrations).

### Publicity

Detailed, extensive and long term publicity is a major factor in fostering awareness of the housing policy public participation program. Use of newspapers is commended, however, it is recommended that prime space be used in future public participation programs. In addition, the advertisement could be made more noticeable and appealing to readers. The use of posters, brochures and cable television is supported. We also support the idea of sending out the discussion paper personally to all interested groups and organizations.

Future public participation programs would benefit from more generous utilization of the different forms of media. In addition, advertising in the smaller publications, such as community newspapers, community league newsletters and labour newsletters would be helpful in getting at neighbourhood groups. Utilization of city community workers is also recommended as word of mouth and community contact is an effective means of disseminating information.

## Public Meeting Process

The formal presentations were too lengthy, thereby allowing only minimal time for group discussions. The presentation appeared to concentrate on details and could more effectively focus on issues such as land development, land ownership, production and distribution of housing and innovative housing. Greater concentration on policy alternatives is recommended in future presentations.

The discussion groups focused on the entire housing policy, rather than being organized into topics or areas of interest to allow planning to happen. Small groups focusing on planning is recommended for future meetings.

Discussion leaders appeared not to be prepared. Prior selection of group leaders, with adequate orientation might help to facilitate small discussion groups. Most significantly, more time allotted to small group discussion would effect more input from participants.

The idea of general public meetings is basically good. Each meeting encompassed a large area of the city. In conjunction with this process, however, meetings should be held with specific community groups and organizations over a longer period of time. Community groups might be helpful in encouraging neighbourhood people to come to meetings.

## Location of Meetings

Public meetings were held in churches and community halls, which tend to be off major transportation arteries, difficult to find and are less likely to be serviced by buses. Meetings held in well known neighbourhood schools are more accessible. This might encourage more people to attend.

## Questionnaire

Some people found the questionnaire to be unwieldy and overlengthy. In order to get sufficient information, however, we realize that a lengthy questionnaire is necessary. Some key issues were dealt with in the questionnaire, including land ownership and government production of housing, although the notion of government production was limited to

housing for disabled, the poor or senior citizens. The questionnaire may have placed more emphasis on the total community rather than type of shelter to be provided.

The city should attempt to have as many people as possible complete the questionnaires. Further dissemination is recommended by way of newspapers and/or a representative sample of the city's population.

#### Use of Citizen Input

The public participation process did not indicate how citizen input is to be used, and what weight is to be attached to it. No indication was provided regarding feedback to citizens on the kind of input, and how it was incorporated in housing policy. This kind of feedback might help to make the participation experience more meaningful for the people involved.

#### Budget

A sizably expanded budget would be necessary in future public participation programs to allow for more extensive advertising and more public meetings.

#### General Comments

The housing policy public participation program was a rushed process so that housing policy decisions could be made by the end of 1976. This implies that policy decision deadline must be extended in order to incorporate citizen input, which terminates as late as December 15, 1976.

A citizen participation process which is not successful does not necessarily support the idea that citizens do not want to participate. More realistically, it reflects a process which was ineffective in fostering citizen input. Perhaps an educational campaign would be helpful in allowing people to learn about the opportunity to participate, and the process being utilized. Given that knowledge, they may well want to have input into civic citizen participation policy as such.