

Wrap Up Comments

RETHINKING THE REGION V Forum on Citizen Advisory Bodies and Urban Policy

June 17 2017

Ken Cameron FCIP RPP

The forum delineated some **foundational points, the roles of advisory bodies and challenges.**

Two Foundational Points

1. **There is the dilemma of public engagement.** As Tina Nabatchi showed, the citizen in today's society is feeling connected but lonely, frustrated and impotent. Social media and other changes have vastly improved the **hardware** we have available for communication (both one-way and two-way), but we lack skill in using the **software** necessary for providing effective engagement and real influence at a human level.
2. **We live a representative democracy** in which we choose the people to govern on our behalf but we want to be engaged in the process. The purpose of mechanisms of engagement, including advisory bodies, is to contribute to the making of **policy** while steering clear of **politics**.

The Two Roles of Advisory Bodies

1. **Provision of advice** based on expertise, broader and longer perspectives, and wisdom and patience. Advisory bodies should be a source of institutional memory, and where there is a city-wide general plan (as there should be in Vancouver) they should be the custodian of that plan as a reference point for decision making. Advisory bodies should be safe and credible places in which to generate and review new ideas, including ideas on the second role, engagement.
2. **Provision of engagement** based on the advisory body's representativeness, credibility, connectedness (what one participant called "the fan-out effect") and accessibility. Advisory bodies can articulate the perspectives of those who are not otherwise at the table, including under-represented people and interests and future generations. They can be a mechanism for recruitment of people to the causes of civic engagement and democracy.

Four challenges – making engagement part of decision-making which results from active, respectful outreach rather than an afterthought

- 1. Siloes:** with the proliferation of advisory bodies in many local governments, we need to ensure they are forces of integration in decision making rather than a replication of the siloes of administrative organization.
- 2. Support:** advisory bodies need “more than sushi” to be effective. They need training in orderly, democratic operation, in the machinery of government and in the understanding of policy issues. They should be resourced as the key components in the governance process that we expect them to be.
- 3. Interests rather than positions:** advisory bodies need the time and expertise to understand the underlying interests and motivations behind conflicts and to find the spaces where agreement rather than division can be grown.
- 4. Digital interaction:** The proliferation of social media has opened up vast new challenges for the role of advisory bodies in the same way that it has in virtually every other walk of human life. In pursuing the opportunities offered by these unprecedented developments, advisory bodies must find ways of overcoming the dilemma of the connected but lonely and frustrated citizen that Tina Nabatchi set out so clearly. The tools and techniques she suggested are a valuable start along this road.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, and at the risk of sounding trite, I believe it is all about people finding ways to work together in collaboration and with respect. By bringing together people from a broad spectrum of roles and communities, the forum offered a perspective about how advisory bodies can help people work together and generate hope and action for better communities.

Vancouver, British Columbia

June 26 2017