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Participatory facilitation inputs into land management by the City of Ottawa

by ANNA V HERCZ

In 1996, the City of Ottawa Council was working on two land management projects: the Greenway System Management Plan and the Open Spaces Project. Integral to the projects was the facilitation of a series of community workshops to gain insight into the various stakeholders' concerns for the city's open spaces.

The City of Ottawa has an existing landscape mosaic of loosely linked natural and undeveloped areas that can serve as the basis for an ecologically functional, multi-use green network. When fully realised, the Greenway System will link natural areas, ecological corridors, hydro corridors, parks and communities. The Open Spaces Project needed the input of the community to prioritise which areas the city will protect in the future.

Of the lands in the City of Ottawa's conceptual system, 74% are owned or managed by public agencies, making a protected, connected and enhanced Greenway System in the City of Ottawa a workable long-term goal. However, there are significant barriers to overcome in achieving this ambitious goal.

First of all, the multitude of stakeholders – including landowners, planning agencies and users – have different roles, and are guided by different interests. Public ownership of the large part of the system does not ensure the survival of the system. The different mandates and interests are not always consistent with the objectives of the Greenway System. While

all stakeholders support the greenway concept, defining, protecting and managing the system, according to a common vision, is a complex undertaking that involves stakeholders in debates over boundary, zoning and management issues. The sacrament and management of the Greenway System also crosses paths with many other planning interests such as urban development, recreational development, flood plain management, integrated watershed management, and capital recreational pathways planning. Innovative solutions are needed to protect and manage the system and address changing needs, environmental concerns, and competing interests.

Secondly, because of financial constraints on public expenditures, greenway preservation, through the municipal acquisition of large amounts of land, is not a realistic approach. Enhancement and protection of the system by land use policies, an agreed upon management plan, stewardship programs, and public-private partnerships are integral elements of the action plan necessary for the full realisation of the system.

Community workshops

Agreement on the objectives and the management principles by all stakeholders had been essential. A key part of the solution was community participation and empowerment. The main mechanism to achieve this goal was the Community

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Workshops, held in different parts of the city. The goal of the Community Workshops was to better understand which green and open spaces people value, why they value them, and what their visions were for the future of these spaces. In most parts of the city, the councillors representing those areas also attended the workshops. They were there to listen and reassure people of their support.

The workshops incorporated community mapping as a method of participatory appraisal. By engaging the public in this way, we were able to collect accurate data in a very cost effective manner that likely would not have been available through other means. Staff from the city's Environmental Branch, who served as facilitators, underwent five days of training on participatory mapping and facilitation techniques.

What we found remarkable about this process is the fact that the information created at the workshop came from the community. There were no draft plans, documents, or maps given to the participants for comments. There was no professional presentation, nor a question and answer period. The strength of this approach for public consultation was that it had a self-organising component. With the help of facilitators, participants mapped the green and open spaces of their neighbourhoods, indicating uses and values as well as shared information, knowledge, and problems, as opposed to only collecting information. Participants were encouraged to discuss conflicting issues and the results led to the development of a collective opinion and a series of implementable recommendations.

What did the community tell us?

Participants placed great emphasis on community/citizen action. They felt that the community should be better organised to have a voice in planning, management and operations. They offered to take responsibility for many stewardship related activities and asked that the City provide direction on

desirable community stewardship initiatives. This would have never happened during a traditional consultation meeting.

From the perspective of citizen involvement in municipal decision-making, perhaps the most important outcome of this work has been its impact on the work of the Natural and Open Spaces Study. Data collected on all areas of the city through the workshops was used to determine the social criteria and social value of Ottawa's existing natural and open spaces.

What happened with the results?

The information generated during the workshops we used in different ways. The final version of the individual workshop reports and the overall executive summary were distributed to Greenway and Open Spaces project staff, property owners, community organisations and a variety of planning agencies, for integration into diverse plans, projects, and programs. A presentation to City Council further assured that the results of the workshops reached decision makers.

The workshops and the results helped the City to make important decisions on how to continue the Greenway and Open Spaces protection and management initiative for many years to come.

What did we learn from the process? What would we change?

The consultation involved only local residents. While the workshops were intended for all stakeholders, primarily the participants at the community workshops were the local residents. We felt that a series of workshops addressing specific stakeholder groups, such as youth, business, public landowners, and different planning agencies, would have been beneficial.

We also felt it would have been useful not to depend on the events and to get out and about to reach other people.

We felt it was very useful and important to have a process where young peoples' opportunity to participate and their knowledge and opinions were equal to that of the adults.

Upon evaluation of the methodology and the results, we were convinced that the City should use participatory methods more often in the future. They could be applied to many different projects or initiatives such as strategic planning, the creation of urban design guidelines and budget preparation.

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NOTES

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