

Citizen Participation in Post-“Unicity” Winnipeg

Student Paper No. 1

**by Doug Shand
1991**

The Institute of Urban Studies





THE UNIVERSITY OF
WINNIPEG

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FOREWORD

With this monograph, the Institute of Urban Studies is pleased to announce the establishment of the Student Papers Series. The objective of the Series is to disseminate the results of investigations undertaken by students of the University of Winnipeg Urban Studies Program to fulfil course requirements or personal research interests. It is expected that the introduction of this series will provide an incentive to students to produce well-researched, well-reasoned and well-written papers, thereby promoting excellence.

Brij Mathur
Acting Director
Institute of Urban Studies

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Doug Shand
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INTRODUCTION

This paper is a brief discussion of the Government of Manitoba's attempt to increase citizen involvement in Winnipeg's civic government. It will discuss the original proposed reforms, as well as some of the contemporary reactions. The reforms will then be assessed in light of the two major reviews following the passing of 1972 *City of Winnipeg Act*. These are the *Report and Recommendations* of 1976, and the 1987 *Cherniack Report*. Emphasis will be placed on the two main instruments of citizen involvement, the Community Committees and the Residents' Advisory Groups.

PROPOSED REFORM: 1970 WHITE PAPER

Late in 1970, the Government of Manitoba issued the *White Paper*, "Proposals for Urban Reorganization in the Greater Winnipeg Area." The thirteen municipalities were to be joined to create one "Unicity." Among the many recommendations was the establishment and fostering of greater citizen participation. This concept had gained wide popularity in the 1960s, and its perceived importance is reflected in the *White Paper*. Under the heading "Towards a Healthier Urban Community," the *Paper* recognizes "the individual's sense of frustration with, and alienation from, the governments supposedly in existence to serve him [*sic*]."¹ The *White Paper* emphasises that the reason for alienation is that the form of urban government at that time was poorly structured and not responsive to the people:

The citizen often knows neither whom to blame for a given situation, to whom to turn for remedy, nor to whom to tender advice if he feels he has a worthwhile idea to offer. . . . He is unable . . . to exercise his full rights of democratic involvement in the level of government theoretically most responsive to his wishes.²

Some of the main proposals suggested that the size of Council be greatly increased from 19 members to 48. It was thought that the larger Council would be better able to represent the people on a ratio of some 10 thousand people per Councillor. Another significant proposal was to group several Council Wards into thirteen Community Committees. The wards comprising the Community Committees were to be formed out of areas of "traditional identity," originally meaning the old municipalities.³ The Councillors then would serve on both the Council and on the Community Committees. A local council of citizens was to be elected to each Committee to advise and assist Councillors on matters of policy. These became known as Resident Advisory Groups (RAGs).

THE ROLE OF THE COMMUNITY COMMITTEES

The primary purpose of the Community Committees was to provide public access to the Councillors and to the system of local government. This access would allow for a more sensitive and democratic form of government. The Committees were to receive a series of administrative duties such as the care and maintenance of local services. These included services such as libraries and local park and recreational facilities. Community Committees could budget, propose programs for, and supervise these services, as well as make some decisions on zoning matters. The Committees themselves were to be assigned operating budgets by Council, and had no power to hire or fire service staff. All facilities and staff were assigned to the Committees by Council.

The Government of Manitoba believed that the need for citizen involvement was paramount to the new reforms. The Community Committees were to allow for greater communication and interaction between the constituents and their Council members, or, in other words, to humanize government. The Community Committees would meet regularly, and, if the need arose, irregularly, to provide a forum for discussion and debate of issues of local concern. Officials of the civic government could attend, explain issues and proposals, and hear the electorate's opinions for themselves. The Provincial government envisioned an urban populace well informed and involved with civic government, and a civic government "in tune" with the community's wishes.

There was a belief that these structural changes would create a climate for active participation, and discourage the trend for people to be apathetic towards local government. The local focus of the Community Committees was believed to be able to address this problem. The reformers were confident that the structures would effect a positive change in the attitude of the citizens. However, they stated that "Much will depend too on how individual councillors use the opportunity to achieve a heightened relationship with their constituents."⁴

CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS AND CRITICISMS

Following the *White Paper* and the anticipated legislation, many people began to react to what they perceived to be the eventual results of the proposed reforms. A selection of views was published in *The Future City*, an anthology of articles published by the Institute of Urban Studies. The attempt to increase citizen participation drew much criticism, not of the concept, but of its proposed implementation. The *White Paper* contained too many "ifs" or conditions that if not met, would have the potential to reduce the effectiveness of reform. The effect of Councillors' attitudes towards the Community Committees would

be of great importance, as "the quality of government under the new system will depend . . . on the quality of men [*sic*] who are elected by us."⁵

Another criticism was that the reforms failed to take account of potential problems such as citizen apathy, and that there were no realistic safeguards were proposed.⁶ For instance, the *White Paper* was seen as too optimistic in its expectation that structural changes would automatically lead to changes in citizen participation. The whole reform package could falter as a result.

The proposed duties of Councillors also created concerns. They had to serve on two bodies at the very least, and more if a Councillor was more actively involved. It would be difficult for them to find the time to have meaningful contact with their constituents. The more involved and the more influential the Councillor, the less the public access:

For example, a Major who is a councillor from Transcona, would be Chairman of the Central Council, member of the Executive Committee, member of the Board of Commissioners, member of the Community Committee, and would still be expected to be available to the people—a virtual impossibility.⁷

The Community Committees were recognized as having very little real authority. They were delegated "policy-making scraps" that were of no real power, and therefore had no effective authority. For instance, they could direct personnel and supervise them, but they had no other control over their staff. Public employees would give greater credence to directives from their superiors in the central administration than to requests from local politicians.⁸ Community Committees were created to increase citizen participation, but were given very little meaningful work to do.

A larger Council was seen to "dilute" the persuasiveness or weight of individual Councillors.⁹ Perhaps they were more available to the public, but they had less authority than before.

More basic points were raised about the stated purpose of the reforms. Were Winnipeggers alienated and frustrated? Was their apparent apathy a result of disgust and disdain? Citizens of urban communities have greater contact with the local government because it provides many essential and daily services. Attitudes towards government administration are reflective of the level of satisfaction with the services.¹⁰ When services are "good," people do not complain; when they are bad, then they complain. Often the service personnel that are in contact with the public create these positive or negative impressions. They may not be entirely the result of alienation and frustration.

THE CITY OF WINNIPEG ACT

On January 1, 1972, the *City of Winnipeg Act* came into effect. The *White Paper* was translated into legislation with little change. There was now a City Council of 50 members, and the number of

Community Committees became twelve. There were some significant difficulties, however. Problems quickly became apparent between two factions. There was a "sort of 'tug-of-war' between those officials who adhered to conventional ways and those who sought to develop the institutional framework within the spirit of the new legislation."¹¹

The Province gave little funding to cover the transition from Metro to what became known as Unicity. Only \$100 thousand was granted, while services for the "old" Winnipeg alone cost \$2.3 million.¹² Funding problems would also have an affect on the Residents' Advisory Groups.

PROBLEMS WITH THE RAGS

The *Act* allowed for the creation of Residents' Advisory Groups. The whole RAG system was very loosely worded in the *Act*. The Committees were not obligated to create the RAGs, and for that matter it was not specified how often they should meet. RAG members were people elected at Community Committee meetings to provide direct citizen involvement with the Committees. The two groups were supposed to complement one another. The RAGs were to advise and assist, while in return the Community Committees were to keep the citizens informed (via the RAGs), and to hear any feedback that would result. The implementation period was short, only six months. In this time, people had to be introduced to a new idea that was without precedent and without guidelines.¹³ Problems of funding were inherent from the start.

The members of the RAGs were volunteers. Often, they did not have the time, and experience or resources to gather sufficient information on issues in order to make knowledgeable and valuable contributions to the Community Committees. While the Community Committees had a staff and a budget, the RAGs had no staff and very little money. The RAGs had only \$200 per ward to cover their operating costs. This money was to pay for secretarial services and for copies of pertinent information. There were limited experiments with staffing provided by the Company of Young Canadians. They provided research assistants who could gather information on issues that previously was not available. However, as a report on the experiment stated, "very little guidance was given to the RAG on how to deal with the issues once the staff left" (P.H. Wichern, Chair of Fort Rouge RAG). What was necessary was a permanent staff, which meant increased funding.

There were proposals to aid the RAGs, but they were not followed up. In a letter sent to the City Board of Commissioners and to the Minister of Urban Affairs, Commissioner David Henderson outlined a financial plan to provide RAGs with enough resources for staff and to facilitate "information and informed advice, and obtaining the means by which each Group can communicate with the community residents

at large."¹⁴ There was to be an annual grant of \$65 thousand to be given to the RAGs city-wide, on an average maximum of \$5 thousand each. Some \$2 thousand were to be spent on operating costs, and would give the RAGs sufficient aid to function according to their original design. This was the result of a Tri-Level Committee that was seeking Federal aid. There were assurances that the Provincial Government would provide support for such a plan. However, this plan might have been scuttled by a growing ambivalence on the part of Councillors towards to RAGs. A survey revealed that half the Councillors wanted no further aid to be given to the RAGs, while only a third wanted to see an increase. Many ambivalent Councillors voiced their displeasure with the RAG system to Ottawa.¹⁵

The main complaints about the RAGs were that they were uninformed, and open to abuse by activists and special interest groups. Power over zoning was seen by some developers as being restrictive to the pro-development movement. Any attempts at area or Unicity planning would be hindered by the very parochial nature of the RAGs. Each issue would be dealt with from a very local perspective, whether or not the "public good" was being served.

The duties of the Community Committees were also seen as purely administrative, and as capable of being handled more efficiently elsewhere. The role of the Committees was as limited as their power. Some Councillors began to think that they were "spinning their wheels," and that their time could be put to better use elsewhere. Many in the RAGs were also of the opinion that their efforts were wasted. Due to their lack of power, the Committees often had to refer back to Council, and so they removed the RAGs from the political process. Membership and attendance in the RAGs began to decline.

The physical aspects of the Community Committees were not based on any definite social patterns. They were based on old Metro districts, and in fact reflected administrative districts and not naturally occurring political or social patterns. The close ties between community and citizen participation were the basis of the reforms. Once a structure was put in place, people would participate in the system. These expectations were shown in practice to be naive, "for in today's larger metropolitan areas, politically defined areas rarely are sociologically or functionally defined communities as well."¹⁶

The regrouping of services into six administrative areas was an early indication that Council was attempting to displace the Community Committee system. These new districts had nothing to do with the twelve Committees, and could only be seen as "a way of having the administration avoid any accountability to the Community Committee level" (Axworthy and Epstein, 1974, p. 9). The new system was breaking down.

COMMITTEE OF REVIEW—FOUR YEARS ON

As a result of the problems with the new organization, a Committee of Review was established by the Minister of Urban Affairs late in 1975. This was two years ahead of schedule, and was a reflection of the severity of the problems encountered.¹⁷

There were over a hundred public submissions, and most were in favour of retaining both the Community Committees and the RAGs, and increasing their powers. The Community Committees were seen as vehicles for greater democratic involvement, but without the proper legislation to give them control over relevant issues and policy. Pro-Committee Councillors like Evelyne Reese stated that "participatory democracy is left to the good will of the elected representatives." Councillor Alf Skowron submitted that the RAGs should have a representative sitting on the Community Committee, and that this person be paid for his/her work. Representatives from the RAGs such as David Walker (Chair, Ft. Rouge RAG) raised points about the lack of research facilities and resources, which made pertinent information and technical advice difficult to obtain. This, coupled with the often short notice given to comment on issues, sometimes as little as a few days, was seen as the cause of Councillor ambivalence and declining citizen interest.

Some Councillors, such as Jim Ernst, felt that RAGs were outlets for disgruntled citizens who had "an axe to grind." Most citizens were apathetic, or did not even care to know about the RAG meetings. The only time they showed up was to complain.

One of the more forceful presentations in favour of RAGs was presented by Joe Zuken. Responding to detractors of the RAGs, he stated:

A growing number of Councillors, who formerly paid lip service to the concept of citizen participation are now advocating the abolition of (RAGs) . . . with arguments that these Groups are "pressure groups" and "citizen activists" and "trouble makers" . . . and it is arrogance on the part of Councillors who oppose (RAGs) to believe that they, and they alone, are the fountains of wisdom (quoted from "Brief of the Labour Election Committee," pp. 5, 6).

A problem with input into the Community Committees was raised by the brief from the Centennial RAG. It was pointed out that RAG meetings were recorded as minutes. These minutes were presented to the Committees. As such, only decisions were listed, and not the concerns behind those decisions. There was no place for elaboration or expansion, and this contributed to the impression that the RAGs were impetuous and ill-informed.

The Committee of Review released its findings in 1976.

REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS

The primary focus of the Review was to increase centralization. This was the deep-seated problem that had to be solved in order to remedy Winnipeg's difficulties. The problem was seen to be the conflict of centralization versus decentralization. The issue of citizen participation had to be viewed in this light (p. 30). Greater centralization of authority was the key to making the reforms work. The Review apparently agreed with the anti-Committee Councillors in its recommendations.

The Review questioned the reasoning behind attempts at increased citizen participation:

The idea of political deprivation and alienation in the middle and upper income communities such as St. James, Tuxedo, Fort Garry, West Kildonan and others, seems, in terms of familiar practical reality, curiously inappropriate, and the measures taken to deal with this assumed problem rather a case of overreaction.¹⁸

In an attempt to increase centralization, many of the supervisory and administrative duties were to be removed from the Community Committees. There was no need for citizen participation except in the areas of culture and recreation (p. 87). The Committees were to be responsible for district plans and zoning.

Further erosion of citizen participation was seen by the recommended reduction of the twelve Community Committees to six, matching and confirming the changes of an ambivalent administration. The reasoning was that these new administrative districts were "natural." This was contrary to the spirit of the original reforms. The Community Committees were supposed to reflect district neighbourhoods, not mimic administrative policy.

The Report also advised reducing the size of Council to 39 plus the Mayor, so that Councillors would represent some 9,000 electors, not people. This reduced the level of representation that people had with the Council. The Report seemed to give credence to the criticisms of some Councillors that the overall system was too parochial and too local in its outlook. Perhaps not surprisingly, two such Councillors were William Norrie and Bob Stein, both future Mayors of Winnipeg (p. 17).

The RAGS suffered, as they had no clear role. The Review questioned whether they provided an access to Council that was different from any grassroots movement. The RAGs were originally created to advise and assist, and so were to be kept in this role. Their sphere of influence was limited to providing advice on district planning and zoning.

Since the Review, the changes made have been to reduce Council to 29 seats from 50, and to reduce the Community Committees to six. The few Community Committees carried on, and the participation in RAGs declined sharply.

14 YEARS ON . . . THE 1986 CHERNIACK REPORT

The Provincial Government commissioned another review of Unicity, and the published results pointed to a further degradation of citizen participation. In the *Winnipeg Free Press*, articles occasionally appeared referring to RAGs as "Fascinating Relics." ¹⁹ They were ghosts of a former system that had never worked. The 1976 amendments to the *City of Winnipeg Act* largely put to rest what was left of the RAGs' credibility. They were reduced to a very narrow and seemingly insignificant area of local politics. It is no wonder that the level of participation has declined.

Estimated Membership in RAGs 1972-83					
481					
	348				
		222			
			150	156	152
1972	1975	1978	1979	1982	1983

(20)

The Review believed that the 1976 changes went the wrong way. Instead of limiting the RAGs and Community Committees, the Review panel wanted increased power over budgeting and zoning, as well as the ability to initiate and prepare local plans. Choices and decisions over strictly local services were to be returned to the Community Committees. The areas of the Community Committees were to remain at six. Certainly these were not "traditional" or "natural" areas, but, with their varied composition, they could address the problem of the RAGs' parochial outlook (p. 40).

The system of RAGs was to be changed to allow greater participation. The Review Committee believed that if people had the power to effect change in the community, they would become more involved (p. 38). The current system of RAGs tended to discourage participation rather than encourage it. The RAGs also needed to use the facilities of the Community Committee and to receive no less than \$1 thousand to cover their operating costs. Such an increase would allow the RAGs to obtain copies of pertinent information at the same time as the Councillors.

The Council would also have until January 1989 to decide whether the RAGs were to continue. If not, then Council would have to adopt another method of resident involvement. Until 1989, the Review Committee recommended that the City do its utmost to foster resident participation.

FOLLOW-UP

The Government of Manitoba only instituted some recommendations. Generally, the system has continued with little change. There has been no increase in the funding for the RAGs, and there appears to have been little change in citizen involvement.

In accordance with the *Cherniack Report* recommendation, Council decided in 1989 to continue the present system of RAGs. City Council decided to double the amount per ward from \$2 hundred to \$4 hundred. However, following the original recommendation and debate over the current estimates, there has been a reduction to the original amount. Currently, the City Clerks are budgeting for next year based on the original amounts.

CONCLUSIONS

The Winnipeg experiment with active citizen participation has been a failure. It has failed because from the idea's inception, there has been no clear and meaningful role for residents to play. The *City of Winnipeg Act* was vague in its original wording, and any further changes have been piecemeal.

Certainly there is a role for citizens to play in the civic government, and evidence has shown that, despite the problems, people still attend RAG meetings. The low level of attendance is a reflection of the lack of clarity in their role. It seems that the Council and administration would be in favour of abolishing the RAGs, but do not have any suggestions as to how to fill the gap. Any future changes would have to come from the Department of Urban Affairs. As the *Cherniack Report* stated, the system of RAGs and Community Committees needs power and clear jurisdiction over specific areas. Council has been unwilling to grant or share this power. It must also be understood that Council cannot be crippled by a serious decentralization of power. Citizen participation must be limited to specifically local concerns.

What must be accepted is that in order for people to believe that public participation is worthwhile, they have to have some sort of identifiable evidence to justify their belief. They must be able to propose or oppose change, and then see that their decisions are being implemented. Citizens need responsibility in order to believe in their participation. They must have the power to enforce their decisions, and not be totally dependent upon City Council. The business of making proposals that get lost in an administrative shuffle is a reflection of the problems with bureaucracy, not democracy. Citizen

participation in local government can work, and people do want to make a difference in their communities. However, they must be given a clear mandate and the *responsibility* to govern over strictly local matters.

NOTES

1. Government of Manitoba, *Proposals for Urban Reorganization in the Greater Winnipeg Area* (1970), p. 2.
2. Ibid., p. 5.
3. Ibid., p. 10.
4. Ibid., p. 22.
5. Philip H. Wichern, Jr., quoted in Lloyd Axworthy, ed., *The Future City, A Selection of Views on the Reorganization of Government in Greater Winnipeg* (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, 1971), p. 21.
6. Professor Jim McNiven, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 46.
7. Jim Cassidy, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 7.
8. Professor Jim McNiven, *ibid.*, p. 20.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 20.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
11. C.R. Tindal, *Structural Changes in Local Government: Government for Urban Regions* (Institute of Public Administration of Canada, 1977), p. 31.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 28.
13. Lloyd Axworthy and Donald Epstein. "A Discussion Paper on Urban Populism and Urban Policymaking: A Paper for Presentation at the Conference on the Canadian Urban Experience, May 30, 1974" (Winnipeg: Institute of Urban Studies, 1974), p. 7.
14. David G. Henderson, Commissioner of Environment, City of Winnipeg, "Financial Support for Furtherance of Resident Advisory Group Programs and Objectives Developed within the Concept of the City of Winnipeg Act, Proposal to Board of Commissioners, September 28, 1973," p. 3.
15. Axworthy and Epstein, "Discussion Paper," p. 8.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
17. C.R. Tindal and S. Nobles Tindal, *Local Government in Canada* (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson 1979), p. 65.
18. Committee of Review, *Report and Recommendations* (1976), p. 22.

19. *Winnipeg Free Press*, October 30, 1984.
20. Committee of Review, Issues Paper, *City of Winnipeg Act (1984-85)*, p. 12.

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