

# WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE MUNICIPAL GOVERNANCE

**A Peach Paper**

**20 June 2007**



The City for All Women Initiative (CAWI) is a partnership between women from diverse communities, community organizations, universities and the City of Ottawa. Our aim is to strengthen the capacity of the full diversity of women and the City of Ottawa to work in partnership so as to create a more inclusive city and advance gender equality. We believe that our City can become a better place to live when the ideas and concerns of women of all back grounds are taken into account. [www.cawi-ivtf.org](http://www.cawi-ivtf.org)

## Context

As part of a strategic planning process, City Council is reviewing how it makes decisions. This is partly because the Government of Ontario has passed legislation (Bill 130) permitting municipalities to have more choice about the way they govern themselves. It is extremely important for all those who care about how the City operates – how it makes decisions, who gets listened to, what decisions are taken, what services result from the decisions, and how these decisions affect the quality of all Ottawa residents' lives – to take part in these important discussions.

## What is a Peach Paper and why is it important?

The City of Ottawa has prepared a series of White Papers that provide “an overview of the governance issues resulting from Bill 130 and lists the tools Council may wish to consider in fulfilling their statutory roles”<sup>1</sup>. Upon hearing of CAWI's interest for women's perspectives to be considered in deliberations on governance, **the honourable Mayor of Ottawa, Larry O'Brien, extended an invitation to us to prepare a White Paper**. The Peach Paper (with the colour symbolizing women's distinct perspectives) is our response to the Mayor's invitation. It is one way of putting forward our views on governance that is inclusive of all women. That is, a way of highlighting what is needed for decision-making in the City of Ottawa to take into account the perspectives of the full diversity of women.

**It is important to note, when we refer to women throughout this text, we mean all women in their full diversity, including the voices of Aboriginal women, immigrant women, women that are Francophone, visible minorities, lesbians, bi-sexual and transgendered individuals, those living on low-income or living with disabilities.**

As part of its mandate, CAWI works with city staff to help bring a gender equality lens to decision making. This means taking into account differences and inequalities between women and men; and among women across our diversity. As women from diverse backgrounds, community organizations and academia, we have some specific insights into decision making that will lead to a more democratic, inclusive and effective City government. We believe in a partnership between women and the City of Ottawa ensuring that women's ideas form part of City's decision making. This is the reason for our **Peach Paper** – the diversity of women can contribute to good governance.

The **Peach Paper** will outline:

1. Importance of inclusion of women in City decision-making
2. Criteria necessary for inclusive decision-making
3. Apply minimum standards to citizen engagement mechanisms.
4. Summary of what we intend for the City to take from our **Peach Paper**

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<sup>1</sup> City of Ottawa, Governance Overview, May 2007

## 1. Importance of inclusion of women in City decision-making

The governance review in relation to Bill 130 creates an opportunity for the City to explore how to strengthen municipal accountability and transparency to taxpayers. Increasingly citizens view inclusion in decision-making processes as a way of ensuring accountability and transparency. According to recent research, 85% of Canadians would feel better about government decision-making if they knew that government regularly sought informed input from average citizens. Only 20% felt that the number of engagement exercises on public policy is sufficient.<sup>2</sup>

Additional research shows that a vast majority of Canadians feel it is not merely a responsibility, but their right to be involved. 61% of Canadians believed that citizens should have a more direct say in influencing public policy and should have more opportunity to shape government decisions. Women were even more inclined to favour this position than men (64.5% of women versus 57.5% of men).<sup>3</sup> By its very definition, a democracy is a government that is reflective of the majority's wishes, therefore it is not simply an option for governments to choose to engage its citizens – it is an obligation to its constituents.

The following are some reasons why it is important that decision-making at the City be inclusive of women:

- ❑ Decisions are more effective when they reflect the diversity of needs of all citizens, including women's issues (i.e. personal safety, family care giving, poverty).
- ❑ As women still play a primary role in caring for families, we bring specific insights into good city planning; and in that way, strengthen the city for everyone.
- ❑ "The United Nations defines 30 per cent as the minimal percentage of women required for government to reflect women's concerns. Women represent 12.9 per cent of mayors and 22.9 per cent of councillors in Canada, for an average of 21.4 per cent."<sup>4</sup> As we work towards greater representation of women in formal structures of decision-making, it becomes even more important for the City to foster opportunities for women's engagement to make sure our voices are heard.
- ❑ When it comes to women are Aboriginal, Francophone, visible minorities, low-income, or those who self-identify as living with a disability, there is no representation on City Council or in senior management . A survey by CAWI on women's organizations and City decision making revealed that Aboriginal women, visible minority women and women with disabilities felt City Hall was unlikely to make decisions that represented their interests, as they did not see themselves represented among decision makers.<sup>5</sup>
- ❑ We only need to look at cases of Aboriginal women, whose disappearance and murder is inadequately addressed in cities across Canada, to realize that decision making is more effective when it includes the perspectives of specific groups of women.
- ❑ Process is important – the ways in which decisions are taken influences the kinds of decisions made.

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<sup>2</sup> EKOS Research Associates. *Citizen Engagement 2005: Government Performance and Public Preferences*. Part of the Rethinking Citizen Engagement Study, Ottawa: EKOS, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> Crossing Boundaries National Council, SES Research and the Public Policy Forum (August 2005)

<sup>4</sup> Federation of Canadian Municipalities, "Getting to 30% by 2026," page 1. Available at:

<http://www.fcm.ca/english/policy/wreport.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> City for All Women Initiative: What We Do, "Community Survey April 2004, Taking Women Into Account". Available at:

[http://www.cawi-ivtf.org/pdf/Taking\\_Women\\_Into\\_Account-EN.pdf](http://www.cawi-ivtf.org/pdf/Taking_Women_Into_Account-EN.pdf)

## 2. Criteria necessary for inclusive decision-making

To be accountable and transparent in its governance, there are two basic commitments that the City will need to adhere to for all its civic engagement activities, regardless of what mechanisms it chooses to use:

1. Commitment to equitable access to decision-making
2. Commitment to the public nature of Council's mandate

### 1) Commitment to equitable access to decision making

Not everyone has equal access to city decision making; processes must be inclusive of the broad range of perspectives held by all residents. This includes women, who are not a homogenous group. There are communities within communities of women and men who risk exclusion if specific barriers are not addressed (i.e. Aboriginal persons, immigrants, Francophone individuals, visible minorities, gay, lesbians, bi-sexual and transgendered individuals (GLBT), persons living on low-income or living with disabilities.) To ensure the needs and contributions of the diversity of women and men are included, a gender equality lens should be applied to all services, programs and policies.

### 2) Commitment to the public nature of Council's mandate

Building on the first commitment, we recommend that Council keep in mind the 'public nature' of municipal mandate, when deliberating on how to make use of the delegation powers accorded by the new legislation. Efficiency aims may result in loss of equity, transparency and accountability. To ensure that commitment to its mandate with the electorate is not undermined, we urge the Council to hold further public consultation in deciding if, and what, to delegate to local boards, service boards, and service corporations.

It is important to recognize that effective decision-making requires more than consultation, but also genuine interaction and open exchange of ideas. Women can bring a breadth of knowledge to help create better policy and program outcomes when engaged in meaningful dialogue.

These first two criteria need to be applied to the following three criteria:

1. Good information (data, public education, accessible formats, evaluation of services)
2. Sufficient Resources (City staff, money, space, material)
3. Effective and on-going mechanisms (we are going to look at some of these)

### 3) Good information

Accurate and timely information allows individuals to offer meaningful input into a decision-making process. Information needs to be easily available and in a form that is understandable and accessible. The information needs to be made public and widely distributed so that all of us can start from the same point – knowing what is being done at City Hall and knowing what decisions are being considered. The City must take an active leadership role in the dissemination of information.

Good information is essential to all women, whether they be long-standing residents or newcomers to our community – to learn about the services, programs and policies that exist in Ottawa, how to access services, how decisions get taken, and how they can make their voices heard. All this is impossible without good and relevant information.

On the other hand, population-specific and gender-disaggregated information about residents is important for city decision makers. For example:

- ❑ Knowing the difference between transit use for men and women at night would help policy makers to ensure that decisions take into account personal safety issues that women face; while recognizing that immigrant women are more likely to take transit at off-peak hours and for multiple stops can inform effective transit planning.
- ❑ Knowing that women's greater responsibilities for childcare can limit their ability to participate in public consultations would help policy makers in designing a combination of different formats for gathering public input.
- ❑ Knowing that low-income households (many of which are women-led) are less likely to access the Internet (about 88% of adults with household incomes of \$86,000 or more used the Internet in 2005, well above the proportion of 61% among adults living in households with incomes below \$86,000<sup>6</sup>) would also induce policy makers to consider alternative dissemination mechanisms for residents living with low-income.

Given the long documented fact that systems of political processes may create significant barriers to the inclusion of women, we need good to flow in two ways: information about residents to City staff and decision makers; and information about the City that is appropriate, easily available, easily understandable and widely accessible to residents.

#### 4) Sufficient Resources

Women in the community have knowledge of services, programs, and policies through their lived experiences that are critical for effective decision-making. However, there is an inherent imbalance in the resources and capacities of a municipality and community organizations. It is important for Council and officials to acknowledge the diversity of capacity amongst organizations (for example: grassroots immigrant women's groups in comparison to established agencies) - and the City should make resources available to facilitate their ability to participate.

For participation to be meaningful, women need to be able to develop their arguments and document their positions which require access to resources. There are different kinds of resources that can be made available. Some cities have offices that focus on issues of equity and diversity; which could benefit our city. Still others give grants to organizations for projects that relate to the inclusion of women in municipal decision-making or in women-centered community projects.

#### 5) Effective and On-going Mechanisms

For decision making to be inclusive, there must be structured processes that are ongoing, transparent and well identified. CAWI is always amazed to discover how few women across our diversity are informed of our rights and opportunities for civic engagement. Residents must be informed as to how they can participate and these mechanisms should not change without notifying the community. The use of a variety of mechanisms is essential for allowing women to participate given their respective capacity.

Effective and on-going mechanisms must emanate from a commitment to equitable access to decision making and affect both formal structures of the City (City council, executive management team, senior bureaucrats, election process, etc) and its informal norms of practices and established roles and relationships that are so ingrained and accepted that they form part of the City's institutionalized structures. To render inclusive these formal and deeply ingrained informal structures will not be automatic. It requires political awareness and intentional scrutiny.

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<sup>6</sup> Statistics Canada. "Canadian Internet Use Survey," in The Daily, August 15, 2006.

We propose the following **minimum standards** to be applied to all civic engagement mechanisms:

1. Ensure decisions are transparent and clear.
2. Keep public informed of opportunities for citizen engagement.
3. Engage in broad-based consultations, inclusive of women and men affected by decisions (including: Aboriginal persons, immigrants, Francophone individuals, visible minorities, GLBT individuals, those living on low-income or living with disabilities).
4. Use multiple mechanisms to meaningfully engage residents across diversity.
5. Apply a gender equality lens when designing mechanisms and processes.

We have evaluated some of the mechanisms outlined in Bill 130 in terms of their strengths and limits. Based on our community consultation, our analysis focuses on what is needed for them to be inclusive. As the governance review proceeds, the City needs to consider the implications for the diversity of Ottawa's population when amending, eliminating, or potentially adding new ones. As an example, if the decision is made to remove all citizen advisory committees, consideration should be given to what mechanisms will be established in their stead to ensure that citizens continue to have vehicles to participate in ongoing decision-making processes within the city.

### **Citizen Advisory Committees**

Strengths:

- ❑ Long standing, consistent, and focused on specific public issues.
- ❑ Members are informed and more prepared to monitor City activities.

Limits:

- ❑ Support staff is limited and councillors are no longer members of the committees.
- ❑ Lack of broad public awareness of their existence; may not fully represent community concerns; may be influenced by strong personalities.

To be inclusive:

- ❑ Train chairs to use inclusive processes.
- ❑ Increase public awareness of the committees so that the public can engage with them.
- ❑ Ensure recruitment process is timely and actively invites participation from diverse communities.
- ❑ Ensure sufficient staffing and financial resources to committees and sub-committees.

### **Task Forces**

Strengths:

- ❑ Multidisciplinary and problem-solving focused on a specific issue.
- ❑ Forum for staff and community to share ideas and perspectives.

Limits:

- ❑ Gender and diversity issues can be overlooked depending on who defines the issues.
- ❑ Reports and recommendations may not be implemented.

To be inclusive:

- ❑ Facilitate effective follow-up and accountability to communities.
- ❑ Broad-based consultations; clearly define problem and recruit members that reflect diverse perspectives.

### **Community-Staff Working Groups**

Examples: Aboriginal Working Group, City for All Women Initiative

Strengths:

- ❑ Same as Task Forces, although not problem specific.
- ❑ Has longer time frame.
- ❑ Able to develop expertise over time and ensure follow-up.
- ❑ Members are selected because of their experience and expertise.

## Focus Groups

### Strength:

- ❑ Collects in-depth perspectives.

### Limits:

- ❑ Specific groups of women could be left out or hesitant to participate.
- ❑ Focus of questions and analysis of findings can be shaped by the perspective of the interviewer.
- ❑ Summary of the discussion is subject to interviewer's interpretation of answers.
- ❑ May not be inclusive of specific concerns (i.e. language, newcomers, women and men).

### To be inclusive:

- ❑ In designing focus group process and analysing findings, ensure involvement of women from diverse communities and reflect their community's concerns.
- ❑ Ensure location and language is accessible with childcare and transportation support.

## Summits

### Strengths:

- ❑ Efficient use of time and publicity; gives attention to public issues and hears from a variety of perspectives.
- ❑ Brings together diverse representation, including citizens, officials and experts.

### Limits:

- ❑ May not reflect valid concerns of community; depends on who decides what the issues are and implementation.
- ❑ Marginalized citizens are less likely to attend and voice their views.

### To be inclusive:

- ❑ Intentional outreach to involve women from diverse communities, including women who feel isolated or alienated.
- ❑ Ensure location and language is accessible with childcare and transportation support.

## Web Based Survey

### Strengths:

- ❑ Widespread and convenient; potential to reach broad audience, including individuals who have not participated in traditional mechanisms.

### Limits:

- ❑ Participants must have access to a computer and proficient literacy skills, including computer literacy.
- ❑ Questions may not address concerns of specific communities.

### To be inclusive:

- ❑ Public involvement in creation of the survey.
- ❑ Complement activity with other non web-based mechanisms.

## Opinion Polls

### Strengths:

- ❑ Widespread and convenient with potential to reach more people.
- ❑ Gives quick synopsis as to what people think.

### Limits:

- ❑ Outcomes depend on precision of language, questions could be leading depending on what is asked and not asked.
- ❑ Distant way of dealing with the public.

### To be inclusive:

- ❑ Analyze the data of who has been surveyed to identify perspectives that may have been overlooked; create focus group to target these groups.
- ❑ Language needs to be accessible to the level of the participants.

## Governance Structures to Support Council's Role

All decision-making structures should commit to equality, transparency, accountability and public dialogue. The following outlines some considerations to encourage inclusiveness related to potential structures:

- ❑ An **Executive Committee of Council** would not support the commitments outlined above and creates a two-tiered system which diminishes access to elected members and weakens citizen participation.
- ❑ **Sub-Committees** of Standing Committees would be more effective way to have Councillors focus on specific areas if mechanisms are included for citizens to be informed and provide input.
- ❑ **Community Councils**, comprised of Councillors in a geographic area, could allow the public to give input in an easy, accessible and local format, if mechanisms are established to do so.
- ❑ An **Ombudsperson** could ensure the rights of citizens through broad local powers and access to public reports. To be more accountable and transparent, the person's effectiveness would need to be evaluated after three-year period and be an independent body.
- ❑ The **Code of Conduct** protects the rights of citizens and enforces minimum ethical standards.
- ❑ Although **Municipal Service Boards** help resource city services, public accountability is diminished as members are not elected. This mechanism should only be used when there are clear lines of accountability and an appeals process.
- ❑ An **Integrity Commissioner** could provide advice to staff and councillors on ethical issues, interpretation of and enforcement of conflict-of-interest policy, investigate complaints made and make reports to Council on findings and recommendations. As with the Ombudsperson, performance should be reviewed after three-year period and office should be established as an independent body.

### 3. Summary of what we intend for the City to take from our Peach Paper

Listen to the diversity of women – incorporate the suggestions in the **Peach Paper** in governance deliberations.

Use criteria of inclusion to ensure effective and inclusive decision-making, specifically:

1. Commitment to equity in gender and diversity
2. Commitment to the public nature of Council's mandate
3. Good information
4. Sufficient resources
5. Effective and on-going mechanisms

Minimum standards to be applied to all civic engagement mechanisms:

1. Ensure decisions are transparent and clear.
2. Keep public informed of opportunities for citizen engagement.
3. Engage in broad-based consultations, inclusive of women and men affected by decisions (including: Aboriginal persons, immigrants, Francophone individuals, visible minorities, and GLBT individuals, those living on low-income or living with disabilities).
4. Use multiple mechanisms to meaningfully engage residents across diversity.
5. Apply a gender equality lens when designing mechanisms and processes.

### Contributors

Caroline Andrew, Centre of Governance, University of Ottawa  
Rashida Collins, Carleton University School of Social Work, student  
Katherine Graham, Dean, Faculty of Public Affairs, Carleton University  
Lisa D'Addese, Women's Action Team, City for All Women Initiative  
Suzanne Doerge, Coordinator, City for All Women Initiative  
Shukri D'Jama, Ottawa Somali Women's Organization  
Rhonda Fernandes, Equity and Diversity Advisory Committee (EDAC)  
Erin Lee-Todd, Step it up Campaign  
Fantu Melesse, President, Ethiopian Community Association  
Hamdi Mohamed, Executive Director, Ottawa Community Immigrant Services Organization  
Hindia Mohamoud, Director Community Impact and Investment, , United Way Ottawa  
Sandy Onyalo, Director, Ottawa Rape Crisis Centre  
Cathy Thornley, Ottawa Women's Training and Employment Network (OWTEN)

