



Standing Panel on Toronto Planning Review Panel in Toronto, Canada

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The story

In 2015, then-city planner of Toronto Jennifer Keesmaat called for the establishment of a sitting citizens' panel to review and comment on major planning initiatives. Keesmaat was familiar with citizen participatory events at the time and believed that her department's work could lend itself well to public engagement. This was not the first standing citizens' panel that Toronto, nor the City Planning Division, had implemented. Prior to the Planning Review Panel, the city had held what was called the Design Review Panel, an opportunity for architects to offer their expert insight and advice to the city. As Peter MacLeod from Mass LBP put it, Keesmaat thought, "we hear from experts on design, why not hear from citizens about planning?" The first of these review panels would run for two years, wherein the same twenty-eight participants would meet for sixteen day-long meetings to learn about the city's urban planning proposals, listen to experts, speak with stakeholders, and provide "informed, representative public input on major city planning initiatives shaping Toronto."¹


The model

Institutional linkage and recruitment

Though the city planner had called for an advisory citizens' panel in 2015, the first one did not take place until November 2017. The participants were chosen by civic lottery. Mass sent letters to 10,000 households in Toronto to recruit participants. The participants were then chosen for representativity along the following criteria: age, gender, geography, tenure (how long they had lived in Toronto), and home ownership, which served as a proxy for income. It would run for two years, wherein the same twenty-eight participants would meet for sixteen day-long meetings to learn about the city's major urban planning proposals, listen to experts, speak with stakeholders, and provide input. Mass LBP and the City Planning Division agreed to a dual contract that established both parties' responsibilities in this endeavor. Half of the contract stipulated that Mass LBP design and facilitate the assembly; the other half addressed the City Planning Division's responsibility to



1. <https://oidp.net/en/practice.php?id=1207>



the assembly. Specifically, the contract stipulated that the Division must acknowledge the assembly, respond to its proposals by explaining their thoughts, and act in a good-faith effort to embrace its proposals and advice. As an internal policy, Mass does not require commissioning governments or institutions to make binding commitments to assembly outputs. Rather, they try to create “overwhelming democratic legitimacy,” so that the proposals cannot be simply ignored.

A general model

MacLeod notes that there were no standing panels to draw inspiration from. Instead, his team relied on the lessons they had learned from the previous one-off assemblies and panels they had designed and facilitated. Adjustments were made to these best practices to accommodate the permanence of the standing panel. For example, while one-off panels generally do not include voting, it was included in the standing panels to allow for procedural expediency. Further, the longer format of the standing panel required a greater emphasis on pedagogy (i.e. subject matter learning, process learning, relationship learning). The design process was also heavily informed by engaging directly with participants; MacLeod says that he and his team spend hundreds of hours talking to participants between sessions.

The lessons

Reliance on individual support within the electoral government

This standing panel worked well until Keesmaat left her job. Following her departure, she was replaced by someone less familiar with citizen engagement who ordered a review of all of his predecessor’s programs. During this review, the COVID19 pandemic struck, and he decided to end the program. Additionally, MacLeod says that as the second panel went on, it became a “make-work bodies,” wherein panels are relegated down the policy ladder.

This case study demonstrates that deliberative bodies often, but not necessarily always, require more systemic and rooted support in the governmental body than just one individual. When the Panel’s advocate left, it was left without broader support. There are a number of potential solutions or ways to preempt this: more widespread communication about deliberative bodies, the work they produce, and how they aid the legislative process; or including elected officials in some discussions or inviting them to observe the process.



References

- The International Observatory on Participatory Democracy (IOPD). n.d. *Toronto planning review panel* in [this link](#)