



Dynamic winter, dynamic plan

Multifaceted engagement for Edmonton's WinterCity Strategy

Abstract

Gabrielle Donoff
with
Simon O'Byrne,
MCIP, RPP

Edmonton's WinterCity Strategy demonstrates best practice in following stakeholder input through to implementation. Because of targeted multi-discipline stakeholder engagement from the beginning of the strategy's creation, there is little ground it does not cover in terms of innovative ideas, interested parties, and implementation leaders.

The development of the strategy was guided by Edmonton's WinterCity Think Tank, a volunteer group composed of a range of professionals and interested citizens with a wide variety of backgrounds and interests in the city. This mix ensured that city interests were fairly represented in areas of urban design, quality of life, public life, livability, hospitality, business, tourism, city branding, and marketing, from the community to provincial level. As the city begins implementation of the WinterCity Strategy, it is clear that *For the Love of Winter* is well positioned to "transform Edmonton into a world-leading winter city" (City of Edmonton, 2012).

The Edmonton Ski Club overlooks Edmonton's downtown (Edmonton Ski Club, 2014)

Introduction

For the love of winter could be Edmonton's mantra in the next 10 years. There is great opportunity for amplifying the city's winter experience, and the municipal WinterCity Strategy, *For the Love of Winter: Strategy for Transforming Edmonton into a World-leading Winter City* is poised to do just that (City of Edmonton, 2012).

Targeting multi-disciplinary stakeholder participation from the onset, Edmonton's Winter City Advisory Council created a plan nearly guaranteeing successful implementation.



Skating in Hawrelak Park is a popular wintertime activity for Edmontonians and their guests (Donoff, 2014)

The secret to encouraging Edmontonians to love winter isn't just about adopting merino-wool long underwear as a second skin (although weather-appropriate fashion is a part of it) – it's about engaging stakeholders representing all aspects of winter city transformation, from health and design specialists to business leaders and marketing gurus.

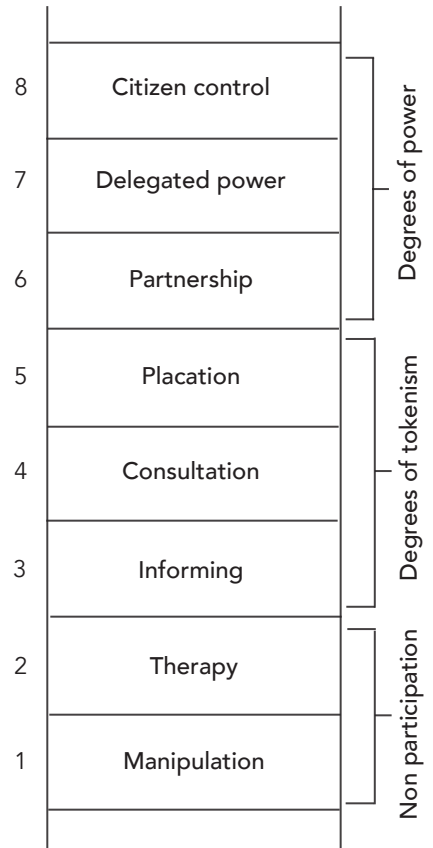
The result: a plan that Edmontonians can get behind, and are excited to invest in as the strategy snowballs through to implementation.

Background

It is a concern in the planning profession that many plans are produced, but the rates of implementation are much less. The profession's credibility is at risk if the practicality of planners' work is challenged when plans are left to collect dust on a shelf. Ideally, planners should consider methods for realizing plans from the initiation of the planning process.

Stakeholder participation

Great success has been found across disciplines when above average levels of stakeholder participation are incorporated. Public participation is often cited by planners as a key part of any planning process, but the level of involvement and degree to which public opinion influences final plans can vary greatly.



Eight rungs on the ladder of citizen participation (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217)

Arnstein's (1969) ladder of citizen participation assesses informing, consultation, and placation as tokenism.

Public consultation is done regularly, although the planning and implementation process are not greatly impacted by this type of citizen participation. A more effective exchange is through partnership or delegated power, where the inclusion of citizens throughout the process creates a sense of ownership and purpose, leading to a stronger strategy, plan approval rate, and ultimately greater success in implementation.



Edmontonians would like to see more winter patios like this one at Cafe Bicyclette (John Lucas, Edmonton Journal, 2013)



WinterCity Edmonton launched a winter drink competition to build awareness around the city's winter potential (Mack Male, 2013)

Strategies to promote plan implementation

Meaningful stakeholder participation from the beginning of the planning process allows participants to become invested in the plan's outcome, and thus more willing to contribute to seeing the plan through to implementation (Hacket & Smith, 2001). Participants are more likely to take ownership of a process when there are measurable community-level indicators that are mutually acknowledged to gauge a plan's success (Hacket & Smith, 2001).

Plans can ease the process of implementation by including project roles and recommended budgets in the initial documentation. For example, in Alberta, Red Deer's Downtown Redevelopment Plan included a matrix of recommendations identifying lead agencies, timeline expectations, estimated operating and capital costs, potential partners and resources, and assigned each recommendation to an appropriate group for follow through (Hacket & Smith, 2001). Involving stakeholders throughout the planning process increases the chances that recommended project leads will support the plan through implementation.

For the Love of Winter

Edmonton's WinterCity Strategy, *For the Love of Winter: Strategy for Transforming Edmonton into a World-leading WinterCity* (City of Edmonton, 2012) is innovative, creative, and organized for successful implementation because it is rooted in the ideas of its citizens.



For the Love of Winter envisions new ways Edmontonians can enjoy the city, even in the coldest months (City of Edmonton, 2012)

The Strategy received the Alberta Professional Planners Institute Award of Merit for Comprehensive and Policy Planning in 2013. For following the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2)'s core values, the Strategy was nominated for an IAP2 Core Value Award.

IAP2's Core Values:

- Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
- Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
- Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
- Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
- Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
- Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
- Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

(International Association for Public Participation, 2014)

Ultimately, Edmonton's WinterCity Strategy seeks to change winter culture in the city, for the well-being of its residents and to attract tourists and newcomers. Identifying opportunities to make Edmonton a great winter city will impact local planning and policy.

The WinterCity Think Tank was created to lead the strategy. Almost 40 Edmontonians were targeted to comprise the Think Tank, representing the broad base of support needed to ensure the strategy's success: architects, planners, bicycle commuters, artists, community league representatives, economic development specialists, festival coordinators, local business leaders, First Nations, recreation specialists, business associations, the Chamber of Commerce, marketing experts, researchers, and politicians were all part of the team.

Including these targeted stakeholders from the strategy's inception warrants participant buy-in and helps to anticipate potential implementation problems while the strategy is being created.



The WinterCity Strategy was launched at an outdoor event well-attended by stakeholders (www.benhenderson.net, 2013)

The WinterCity Strategy was heavily publicized and launched at a kick off event followed by a half-day symposium. Presentations to stakeholder groups and nearly twenty in-depth dialogue sessions and workshops targeted key groups for their input. Beyond targeted stakeholder participation, the WinterCity Advisory Council reached out to the public via televised contests, postcard campaigns, social media, and an online crowd-sourcing tool to gather over 1000 ideas for improving Edmonton as a winter city.



The Flying Canoe Adventure performs at WinterCity Edmonton's Premier to Winter Event (Mack Male, 2013)

With a goal to spawn a “blizzard of ideas” (City of Edmonton, 2012), Edmontonians were asked, “What would make you fall in love with Edmonton?” Many of the ideas generated (through tools such as the online IdeaScale, which allows citizens to enter their winter city ideas and rate the ideas of others) are reflected in the strategy, and were independent of ideas generated by other methods.



This WinterCity hat is just one of the many ways the WinterCity Strategy is being promoted (Mack Male, 2013)

A WinterCity Goals Validation Workshop invited participants from the symposium and public engagements to review the WinterCity Strategy goals and direct future think thank work.

This multi-faced engagement strategy highlights the importance of employing a diverse range of engagement methods to create a municipal strategy that is fixed in local observations and desires.

Six months of intensive community participation created a basis for the successful implementation of a strategy that is built from the ground up.

Lessons Learned

Build from the ground up

Edmonton’s WinterCity Strategy gathered ideas from those who will be directly affected by the plan, as well as from precedents and best practices from other cities. The result is a strategy that is distinctly of Edmonton, and reflecting the best ideas for the city’s location and culture.

Experiment with engagement tools

The City used a broad range of tactics to connect with a wide range of its population. By testing a range of engagement techniques, from traditional workshops and symposiums to creative postcard activities and tech-enabled crowdsourcing, the strategy benefited from varied ideas generated in distinct ways.

Target important stakeholders

A key part of the planning process is to approach stakeholders who are experts in the subject at hand. A multi-disciplinary team that is invested in the success of a plan will help carry out recommendations and can also anticipate barriers to implementation.



Implementation was always part of the plan: WinterCity Implementation Workshop (City of Edmonton, 2013)

Maintain a core group

It is important to maintain continuity of people and ideas throughout the plan. The WinterCity Think Tank was ultimately responsible for sorting through all inputs and organizing the gathered data according to goals established in the beginning of the planning process.

Speak a common language

Particularly in the planning profession, acronyms and jargon can begin to take over communication. When working with a multi-disciplinary team, it is important to establish a base level of understanding of the topic at hand to allow for clear, balanced, and meaningful discussion. Communicating ideas graphically and in writing can help accommodate for participants who are visual learners or are unfamiliar with technical terms or drawings.

Reach consensus

When varied opinions arise, refocus participants on a mutually acknowledged goal to help reach consensus before moving on. In creating the winter city strategy, participants could agree on wanting a vibrant and successful city, and could weigh tactics against this goal.



Matthew Gibbs' winning Coldscares design for a Freezeway in Edmonton could become a reality (www.bustler.net, 2013)

Conclusion

The strategies in *For the Love of Winter* are creative, unique, Edmonton-centric, and most importantly, feasible. By bringing local stakeholders on board from the beginning, the Strategy not only represents Edmonton's culture and climate, but also has the support of the communities that can make its visions reality. City Council members, planners, and citizens alike champion the WinterCity Strategy.

Dedication to engaging a wide variety of stakeholders in a wide variety of ways has resulted in a strategy that is attractive to anyone whose interests in the city extend beyond its short summers. As implementation of the WinterCity Strategy begins, community campaigns will continue to engage stakeholders in progressing towards turning Edmonton into a world-leading winter city. For wide-reaching plans like *For the Love of Winter*, an intensive and strategic engagement process is necessary to create a plan that can be efficiently and effectively seen through to implementation.

Resources

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