

# Civic Decision-Making by Design

## A new governance model for community centres in Winnipeg

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### ABSTRACT

This case-in-point describes the process by which the public role in Winnipeg's recreation policy is shifting from policy informant to policy implementer. Following a brief synopsis of the historical evolution of community centres and recreation policy in Winnipeg, we examine the recent events involving community centre management and recreation policy, with special emphasis on the Public Use Facilities Study (PUFS) Report and the ensuing Recreation, Library and Leisure Facilities Policy adopted by City Council. To locate Winnipeg's experience in a theoretical context, the argument is made that we are witnessing a process of social learning on the part of the General Council of Winnipeg Community Centres (GCWCC), community centre volunteers and planners involved in the process. It is argued that this learning is taking place within -and as a result of- a deliberate attempt by the City to construct a network structure among community centres with increased decision-making authority. This structure is intended to promote efficiency in recreation service provision as well as to encourage greater communication between community centres. In conclusion, thoughts are given about the role of planners in this process as advocates of public participation and a more flexible, civic-oriented governance model.

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## introduction & background

### INTRODUCTION

Increasing the role of the public in municipal decision-making has become a cornerstone of the planning profession's raison d'être. Through public participation, planning policies are legitimized and made cogent. Although examples of public consultation in planning abound, their impact on shaping policy varies considerably from place to place. In many cases, public involvement is seen as a necessary part of policy formulation- though not its core. Winnipeg's history surrounding recreation policy and the role of the public offers an innovative example of how civic engagement in planning can be used to achieve municipal objectives.

### BACKGROUND

Since the City took advantage of new provincial legislation and set up a Board of Parks Management agency in 1892, Winnipeg's recreation policy has evolved into a diverse collection of volunteer-driven community centres catering to the needs of their local neighbourhoods. Since the 1930s, volunteers have played a key role in the formation of athletic clubs, providing sports and social activities for their local area. Winnipeg and each surrounding municipality dealt with their own specific needs and negotiated with various provincial and federal bod-

ies for resources. With the post-WWII baby-boomer era, the City adopted a more comprehensive 'cradle to grave' community centre policy that focused on families, youth and war veterans. As Winnipeg and the surrounding municipalities experienced growing populations, citizens demanded more investment and diversity in recreation. Increasingly, the City responded to these demands by allocating funds and providing leadership and assistance to community centre volunteers through training and information campaigns.

Throughout Winnipeg's history, community centres and recreation policy were characterized by volunteerism. Volunteers decided programming, managed facilities and sought out support from relevant agencies. This system of active citizen participation and decision making helped to create a strong sense of community and attachment to the local neighbourhood. Alongside this volunteerism, Winnipeg (and surrounding municipalities prior to Unicity) played a supportive role in funding, volunteer training, facility maintenance and oversight. With the creation of Unicity in the early 1970s, the City was faced with a hodge-podge of facilities and programs.

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General Council of Winnipeg Community Centres

### GCWCC

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This geographically and demographically inconsistent patchwork, while meeting the needs of the local community, did not efficiently serve the recreation and leisure needs of the now larger amalgamated Winnipeg. The need to better coordinate and administer the expanded system resulted in the formation of the General Council of Winnipeg Community Centres. GCWCC's purpose was to provide a common voice for community centre representatives and to act as a liaison between the centres and relevant city departments. The GCWCC includes representatives from 5 District Cen-

tre Boards which comprise elected representatives from individual community centres within each of the districts. In addition to members appointed from the District Centre Boards, GCWCC has representatives from the City of Winnipeg and Winnipeg Minor Hockey Association. Over the last decade, GCWCC's functions have evolved to take on more responsibility in developing volunteer leadership, policy and administering municipal and provincial grants.

While the GCWCC served to coordinate programs and act as a liaison between the city and community centres, it did not hold the authority to enforce decisions upon individual community centres. This resulted in recreational policies that fit the needs of local neighbourhoods and not necessarily those of districts or the city. For example, two community centres located in close proximity to one another would raise money to expand hockey facilities, while the district or city was in need of more senior-oriented programming. With no real authority, the GCWCC was often by-passed by community centres, which instead would convince (through political pressure) their local councilor to support their plans. To overcome this unsustainable predicament, the city knew it had to address this issue.

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**P.U.F.S. report**

Public Use Facilities Study Report

### PUFS REPORT

Foreseeing the growing unsustainability of Winnipeg's recreation, leisure and libraries infrastructure and costs associated with its maintenance, the City commissioned a private consultant to assess the City's 311 public use facilities. The purpose of the assessment was to develop "a long-term sustainable strategy and fiscally sound business case for managing the City of Winnipeg's public use facilities that support an appropriate level of community-based services" (PUFS 2004: 1) Completed in mid-2004, The Public Use Facilities Study details the current state of facilities in the City and envisions four possible future scenarios depending on choices made by City leaders. From the four scenarios presented, PUFS recommended one that would reduce the total number of facilities by 16% including closing a number of community centres while also cutting total pools by 50% and reducing wading pools by a quarter, replacing them with lower-cost spray pads. However, the City would gain six new libraries, 11 new multi-faceted community campuses and five new urban oases, which would provide year-round water recreation. leadership and assistance to community centre volunteers through training and information campaigns.

### KEY COMPONENTS OF PUFS REPORT

- Development of a policy framework
- Assessment of the existing infrastructure
- Community and recreational trends assessment
- Facility usage and programming assessment
- Public and stakeholder consultation
- Strategic implementation plan and business case

With the release of the report into the public domain, local citizens and volunteer groups involved with their community centres voiced their dismay about the possibility of their neighbourhood facilities being closed. While the City commissioned the PUFS report to inform future city policy, many residents took the recommendations made in the report literally and put pressure on the City's political leadership.

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**P.U.F.S. report**

Public Use Facilities Study Report

### PUFS REPORT (continued)

The public outcry that erupted after the PUFFS report was released can best be explained by reflecting back on the historical relationship between the City and its citizens in the domain of recreation policy. Because of Winnipeg's long history of citizen-run community centres, many saw the PUFFS report and its recommendations (interpreted by some as official city policy) as a breach of the City's traditional supportive role. The public's view that the City was taking a heavy-handed governance stance on recreation, by-passing the community volunteers who run the community-centres, was a forsaking of the deep-rooted relationship that had existed since the early days of Winnipeg's recreation policy.

Faced with growing public objection, Winnipeg's Mayor pledged not to force any community centres to close. Behind the scenes, city officials (including planners) worked to create a policy that would "provide Winnipeggers with more contemporary recreation, leisure, and library facilities" (City of Winnipeg, Recreation, Leisure, and Library Facilities Policy, Appendix A 2005: 1), while also meeting critically important goals of financial sustainability and political feasibility. To achieve this balance,

the City's Strategic Management Division came up with a solution that would respect the historic civic-operated community centre model while ensuring a more modern, financially feasible recreational infrastructure. Instead of identifying specific facilities and programs for closure or expansion, the City decided it would empower the GCWCC to design and implement changes it thought appropriate within parameters set by the city. This would also overcome the predicament of having individual community centres by-pass the needs of their district or city through political pressure.

In January 2004, Winnipeg's City Council approved six-principles meant to guide future recreation policy known as the **A.C.T.I.V.E POLICY FRAMEWORK**

- A**ffordable
- C**ommunity Needs-Based
- T**actical Approach
- I**ntegrated Service Delivery
- V**iable Solutions
- E**ffective Services

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### city policy

#### CITY POLICY

The main objective in developing a new, long-term policy for public facilities was to manage spiraling maintenance costs (reflected in grants allocated per square foot). To this end, the City imposed a moratorium on additional square footage of space, approximately one-million square feet for the entire city. The reasoning behind this move stems, ironically, from the success of volunteer groups at raising money to make capital additions to their local community centres. Local citizens, buoyed by a long-history of volunteer experience and community investment, were able over the years to raise funds for the construction of new facilities. The City, in turn, would then be obligated to assume its historic role of supporting these facilities by maintaining their structural integrity. As civic groups raised more money for new projects, the City devoted an increasing portion of its limited budget to the maintenance of both the new and aging facilities.

In capping the square footage, the City is encouraging the reconfiguration and modernization of existing infrastructure. More importantly, it is forcing communication between local communities to work together. Dating back to before the amalgamation of municipalities that would form present-day Win-

nipeg, each municipality had tailored its recreational facilities and programs to its specific needs. With amalgamation and the rising costs of maintenance, the City could no longer afford to sustain this model but was unwilling- politically- to force a more efficient, City-scale recreation policy on communities. The answer, then, became a policy of community-driven decision-making that would achieve a city priority. Community centres could no longer only consider their individual needs (as they could not expand their facilities unless space was given up elsewhere in the community) and would now have to communicate, coordinate and negotiate with other neighbourhoods as well as with the GCWCC to meet their needs. In short, community centres needed to coordinate their individual plans within a broader district context which in turn would be assessed within an overall city context. Significant planning needed to take place.

The GCWCC's authority is to lead this broad planning effort while remaining true to the policy of not increasing overall square footage. After assessing the merits of individual proposals within a city-wide context the GCWCC then provides funding recommendations to the City's Executive Policy Committee.



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## city policy

### CITY POLICY (continued)

Because of the City's realization that it was shifting substantial new responsibilities onto the GCWCC, Council approved a \$50,000 initial operating grant for the hiring of a planner and related administrative costs. It also made provisions for an additional \$150,000 annual increase for subsequent years. With the initial grant, the GCWCC hired a community centre facility planner to coordinate the creation of the first set of recommendations under the new City-imposed parameters.



GOVERNANCE

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### social learning

#### **SOCIAL LEARNING**

While the initial set of recommendations is still in process and set to be presented to Council by July 2006, the experience of the new facilities planner, the GCWCC and community centres can be viewed through the theoretical lens of Friedmann's (1987) ideas of planning as a form of social learning. According to Friedmann, social learning revolves around action and incorporates political strategy and tactics, theories of reality and values. In this case, the community centre volunteers expressed their theories of reality and values through their outcry over the PUFs report, which they believed compromised their historic role of civic decision-making in recreation policy. Their political strategy and tactics were visible in their ability to pressure the Mayor to pledge no forced closing of community centres.

Friedmann also points out that practice and learning take place in complementary cycles and are dependent on the group's staying together. If the group disbands or undergoes radical change, the social learning may cease to exist. In the case of the GCWCC experience, for example, it is crucial that there is relative stability in the staff and volunteers who participate in the initial set of policy

recommendations, as this is the first social learning cycle. If those involved leave the organization, the learning may be lost and City policy and the community centres' role in the process may be jeopardized.

The community centre facility planner hired to coordinate the initial report is what Friedmann refers to a "change agent" (1987: 185). Usually someone with professional training, change agents bring formal knowledge to the process. In contrast, social learning is most often informal and tacit.

Understanding the social learning process reveals the role that planners play and the skills necessary to fulfill that role. As this case illustrates, social learning offers great promise for planners' growing knowledge of and dedication to public involvement in planning. Two key tenets of social learning complement current planning practice. First, planners are increasingly realizing and relying on the public as the key justification of policy decisions. This collaborative approach complements the theory behind social learning. Social learning takes place through group collaboration around a proposed action. Because the group dynamic and group knowledge takes on a distinct and

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### Social Learning & Conclusion

#### **SOCIAL LEARNING (continued)**

paramount role in social learning, a change agent (i.e. planner) has to establish a transactive relationship with the group that fosters mutual learning. Planners' ability to see themselves as part of a greater whole will enable them to avoid the pitfalls of top-down governance models. Secondly, social learning occurs mainly through inter-personal communication, such as face-to-face dialogue. Planners trained and committed to the principles of public participation can create a genuine, meaningful dialogue that instills trust and ensures understanding of issues and viewpoints.

Currently, some community centre volunteers mistrust City officials in general, based on their past experiences with deceptive or unclear policies and a perceived lack of genuine cooperation. Some community members involved with the City's new policy see the process as nothing more than political off-loading of unpopular cost-cutting policies. Fortunately, however, whether these views are warranted or not does not compromise the ability of the process undertaken by the City, the GCWCC and community centre volunteers to transform the role of the public in shaping future recreation facilities and programs.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Although the City's homegrown approach to achieving a municipal objective without compromising the historic role of civic engagement has yet to complete its first social learning cycle, Winnipeg city officials have demonstrated a clear commitment to expanding public participation in municipal governance. The bestowment of greater authority to the GCWCC and concurrent increased funding to support the organization's new duties further support the claim that we are witnessing a novel and genuine shift in governance of municipal recreational policy. This shift provides planners the opportunity to apply theories such as social learning, expanding our understanding of how to best manage change in the urban context.

#### **REFERENCES & RESOURCES**

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