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# FAST FACTS



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## Winnipeg Needs a Better Way to Make Development Decisions

**T**hey're at it again. Having apparently learned nothing from the embittered reaction to backroom decision-making behind the True North arena, Winnipeg decision-makers are once again trying to sell an important new development by telling the public what will happen, instead of asking them.

The latest attempt to sell a secret decision on a matter of great public importance is the recent unveiling of a proposed hotel at The Forks, following a lengthy negotiation with the prospective developer and a decision by the Forks North Portage Board.

Having already decided what to do, the Board then asked the public and City Council how they liked it. Apparently many do not. The design was likened to a mass market motel by one city councillor and a hospital by another. That was not the response the developer and the Forks Board were looking for. According to a news report, the developer, Bob Sparrow, said, "This is a bit disheartening. I'd be shocked if the project was postponed... It would certainly impact the hotel from a cost standpoint."

The implication of course is that the taxpayer will have to pay for the privilege of having a say. We've been through this movie before, and the plot is predictable.

The next chapter in the hotel story will probably resemble a chapter that has already been written in the arena story: commentators will exhort the public to assume a more positive attitude. This exhortation will be supported with another veiled threat: If we do not pull together Winnipeg's economy will stagnate.

It is reasonable to suggest that lengthy arguments over every development cost money and sap our confidence, but it makes little sense to blame the public for reacting negatively to backroom deals on questions of public importance. In the case of the arena, the primary blame belongs to the True North group and to the provincial and local governments for their insistence on making a very important development decision in private, thereby shutting themselves off from much useful information that could have been gained in a public consultation, and all but guaranteeing an angry public response.

As in the case of the hotel, the decision to tear down the Eaton's building and replace it with an arena was announced as a *fait accompli* after private discussions. Not long afterwards, a display was staged in the Convention Centre that was supposed to bring the public up to date. I attended that display and, frankly, found it to be an insult to the intelligence of any citizen with a critical mind. It offered a great deal of glossy advertising, little solid information, and no substantive defence of the project against the various objections that were being raised.

I also kept an eye on the True North and Save the Eaton's Building web sites. Consistently True North failed to make a convincing case, relying instead on spin, while the opponents, despite their far more limited resources, offered a more specific and persuasive set of arguments. The message True North thereby sends is that it considers the public to be incapable of understanding complex issues.

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The Forks North Portage Partnership held an open house at The Forks a week ago, but I am unable to report on it because, though I arrived 10 minutes before closing time, it had already been dismantled and put away – hardly a testimony to the Partnership’s enthusiasm for public participation. There is also a web site, but it offers only a few images of the hotel proposal, and no information. Here too the message is that the public is easily led and none too bright.

Thirty years ago it might have seemed reasonable to argue that it is technically impossible to involve the public in complex development decisions, but there has been much water under the bridge since then. In the first place, as the public has become more willing to assert itself, governments have become more prone to expensive failures resulting from the determination to push forward with projects that looked good to technical experts but could not win public support. In Winnipeg, failed proposals for a fortress-like condominium at The Forks – a previous miscalculation by the Forks North Portage Board – and for an expressway across a residential neighbourhood in St Boniface are only a sample of a longer list of examples.

A growing number of North American cities – Vancouver is one of many – have developed systems of public consultation that have succeeded in involving the public much more fully than has ever been the case in the past. Such a system is necessarily complex, and cannot go forward without political commitment, but the evidence is clear that it can be done.

## A Better Plan

How might the Eaton’s/True North decision have been managed better? All I can manage in a short article is an introductory sketch of some major elements of a workable process. After carrying the True North negotiations through to a realistic proposal, the city could have issued a call for other proposals with a tight deadline, say two months or so. Deadlines are crucially important because few things are more damaging to both urban development and public morale than the endless delays so characteristic of Winnipeg’s usual development decision-making.

With at least two feasible proposals in hand, the city government could have proceeded to provide specific, usable information to the public, detailed enough to allow for informed decision-making, but not so technical as to be impenetrable – the kind of information that is routinely provided to politicians and top public servants. Both the proposal call and the information provided to the public should incorporate the advice of architects, planners and designers.

With competing proposals and good advice in hand, the

process could then be opened to public participation in a series of hearings. Another two months would probably have been enough time for this part of the decision-making process.

After that, it would have fallen to the politicians to decide which proposal is best overall, and to initiate final negotiations on any modifications it might require. But they would begin this part of the process with a choice of feasible proposals before them, and ample information about likely public reactions. Instead of standing before the public as backroom wheelers-and-dealers, or, worse yet, rubber-stamp wielders, they would have been seen to have listened before making a tough decision. The bitterness that has fuelled court battles over the arena might well have been forestalled.

In such a process, few if any participants would get exactly what they want, and undoubtedly there would be grumbling on all sides, but most people are reasonable enough to understand that, in a complex and controversial decision-making process, half a loaf, or perhaps three-quarters of one, is the best anyone can expect. Outrage comes, not from having to settle for less than perfection, but from being ignored.

Public participation is not easy, but it makes the difference between blind decision making and informed decision-making. Blaming the public for its bad attitude toward the actions of government is the last refuge of failed politicians.

—*Christopher Leo*

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