Good Governance and Transparency

Effective and democratic local governance is distinguished by accountability, transparency and inclusivity, in both processes and outcomes.[1] In recent years, the City of Winnipeg has been marked by several incidents of unethical conduct, leading to a public mistrust and a perception that there is a lack of government accountability. Although accountability can be addressed through the general election, there is a need to evaluate decision-making processes and outcomes on a more regular basis.

Transparency is critical for the public and stakeholders to assess policy decision-making and implementation.[2] While there has been increasing interest in consultation, engagement and inclusivity in government decision-making, there are concrete ways that the City of Winnipeg could improve its accountability and relationship with the public. One important component would be to adopt the international Open Data Charter, which is guided by the principle that data is "open and accessible by default" at city hall.[3] Open data is increasingly becoming the standard in Canada, including at the federal level, as well as provincial and municipal.[4] In addition to the Open Data charter, the following proposals are intended to increase transparency, oversight and good governance at the City of Winnipeg. They focus on three areas: council transparency, representation and operations.

Improve Reporting of Council Decisions
The City of Winnipeg's Decision Making Information System (DMIS) provides information on council meeting agendas, minutes, as well as live and archived video feeds of council meetings. However, this system is difficult to navigate, requires significant time to find information, and does not compile it in meaningful ways. Interested citizen groups have developed alternative ways to display information about council decisions, including data such as council attendance and voting records.[5] However, providing information in an easily accessible way should be a key function of local government, and should be done on a mandatory, not on a voluntary basis.

We recommend funding the development of a council decision website that includes basic data in an easily accessible and understandable format. This would require further study but there are established markers of council accountability, including councillor attendance, voting and abstentions record, votes against staff recommendations, percentage of in-camera meetings, declared conflicts, and number of unanimous decisions. It is also suggested that council decision reporting be incorporated in a dashboard that includes spatial data (such as impacted wards) and thematic areas (such as housing, transportation, or recreation) to make finding relevant data simpler.

Cost:
- Staff time and IT contract to develop: $200,000

New expenditure for tracking system improvements: $200,000

Encourage Measures to Increase Councillor Transparency
There is considerable concern about the influence of private interests on council decisions. While these issues are often difficult to address, there are three immediate changes that should be implemented. Firstly, the lobbyist registry should be mandatory, not voluntary. Establishing a lobbyist registry is an important first step, but the voluntary nature arguably does little to improve integrity and transparency. Charitable non-profits providing information to city hall, without expectation or possibility of economic gain, should be exempt from the registry.

Secondly, councillors should be required to post their meeting schedules. Along with public disclosure of expenses and spending, it is increasingly common for elected officials to disclose meeting activities. Lastly, all council votes should be recorded, not only if requested by a member of council, and included in reporting of decision-making. More and more Canadian municipalities are routinely recording votes on all council and committee decisions, rather than just when requested, thereby increasing council transparency and accountability.[6] The first two of these recommendations will not require substantial investments, other than staff time, but would increase transparency around councillors' activities. Other jurisdictions that have moved to recording all council votes have done so with electronic voting systems, which also add to the ease with which this data can be made publically accessible.

Cost:
- Staff time to maintain lobbyist registry and support in posting councillor schedules: $50,000
- Electronic voting system to record all council votes: (approx. $12,000 based on Burlington, ON): $12,000

New expenditure for tracking councillor transparency: $72,000

Develop Comprehensive Strategies for Disposal of Surplus Property

There is a serious concern in the City of Winnipeg about how surplus city land and buildings are dealt with. In several cases, there are questions about how the value of land was determined, the bidding process, as well as the opportunity costs from disposing of city-owned property. Especially where the City has made significant investments in infrastructure such as Bus Rapid Transit, there should be a mechanism for either the benefits from these investments to accrue to the City or for them to serve the public interest more concretely.

We recommend that three strategies be adopted for land deemed surplus. Firstly, affordable housing uses should be prioritized for surplus land, including through non-profit housing developers (either through right of first refusal for sale or lease, or authorize below market value sales) or the development of community land trusts.[7] Secondly, long-term leases (usually 55 or 99-year terms) can be used to maintain a revenue source, allowing for rent increases over time and to capitalize on increased value of properties over a longer term. This should be considered for lands more suitable to employment or industrial uses. Lastly, in all cases, bids should be made publically available.

Assess Strategies to Encourage More Equitable Council Representation

Another concern is how council members reflect the interests of the communities they represent, and balance these interests against city-wide issues. There are differences in how local councillors in North American cities are elected: a) through a ward or district-based system (one council representative per geographical area), b) at-large systems (councilors elected by entire population), or c) a mix of the two. At-large and mixed systems are more common in west coast cities, including Vancouver and Victoria, B.C. There are differing opinions on the most equitable form of representation, however the advantage of an at-large or mixed system is that there is more concern for city-wide issues and vote trading is minimized, though a purely at-large system may weaken the representation of specific groups.[8] There is similar concern about the size of wards in Winnipeg, as large wards may particularly disadvantage smaller groups, decrease the responsiveness of councilors and reduce the pool of candidates for elections.[9]

Given these debates, it is critical to re-assess the City of Winnipeg's election system, paying particular attention to issues of equity and representation. We recommend that the City undertake a study of alternative representative systems and pursue strategies that prioritize more equitable council access for under-represented groups.

Cost:
- Consultant fees for study on election reform: $75,000

New expenditure for study on election reform: $75,000

Total New Expenditures:
- Systems improvements: $200,000
- Councillor transparency: $72,000
- Electoral reform study: $ 75,000

Total: **.347M**

---

1 Zack Taylor, "Good Governance at the Local Level: Meaning and Measurement," in *IMFG Papers on Municipal Finance and Governance* (Toronto: Institute on Municipal Finance & Governance 2016).

2 Ibid.

3 See https://opendatacharter.net/principles/

4 For example, it has been adopted in Ontario (https://www.ontario.ca/page/sharing-government-data#section-1) and Edmonton (https://data.edmonton.ca/stories/s/International-Open-Data-Charter/secq-sswa/).

5 See Open Democracy Manitoba's website which aggregates and visualizes council decisions: http://www.winnipegelected.ca

6 For example, see Vancouver, BC (http://data.vancouver.ca/datacatalogue/council-voting-record.htm); Mississauga, ON (https://www.insauga.com/mississauga-city-council-will-start-recording-votes); and, Burlington, ON (http://www.burlingtongazette.ca/city-councillors-abuse-the-recorded-voting-process-city-decides-to-buy-an-electronic-vote-recording-system/).

7 http://inclusivepolicy.org/strategies/public-land/

8 National League of Cities. http://www.nlc.org/municipal-elections

9 Owen Toews, "Winnipeg Free for All: Towards Democracy at City Hall," (Winnipeg, MB: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2017). The size of wards in Winnipeg, which average about 47,000 people per councillor, is within the range of major Canadian cities, though there is considerable variation, from a low of about 19,000 people/councilor in Regina, SK to a high of about 78,000 people/councilor in Calgary, AB. Alexandra Flynn, "(Re)Creating Boundary Lines: Assessing Toronto's Ward Boundary Review Process," in *IMFG Papers on Municipal Finance and Governance* (Toronto: Institute on Municipal Finance & Governance 2017).