

# Civic Engagement: An essential ingredient of healthy communities

By: Lorna McCue and Tanya Stuart, HC Link

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## Introduction

Civic engagement generally refers to activities aimed at the betterment of society that are initiated and directed by community members rather than governments, institutions or large organizations. While some people have strong connections to their community and decision-makers, many others experience barriers to civic participation. To promote equitable civic engagement, we must look at ways to ensure that all residents have the skills, confidence and opportunity to participate in civic life, at the level they desire.

As a companion piece to HC Link's three-part [Civic Engagement webinar series](#), this resource explores civic engagement and how it relates to the development of Healthy Communities. It also offers ideas for promoting engagement within the civic realm by looking at vehicles for collective action and examples from a number of Ontario communities.

## DEFINITIONS AND KEY CONCEPTS

Civic engagement is sometimes used interchangeably with “citizen engagement” or “community engagement”. While these terms overlap in scope, they do appear to have some distinguishing features.

**Civic engagement** encompasses the broadest set of activities of the three terms. It takes place within the context of civil society - a social space, separate from government and the private sector, composed of not-for-profit and voluntary organizations of people who have come together to advance their common interests and the public good through collective action.<sup>1</sup>

Civic engagement refers to the many ways in which people participate in civil society, such as volunteering, belonging to a faith, fraternal, political or community organization, membership in recreational and sports associations, involvement in advocacy campaigns, participating in government (e.g. advisory committees, consultations) and voting.<sup>2</sup> Civic engagement has a rich historical tradition, being descended from social movements, such as those for civil rights, women’s rights, and organized labour.<sup>3</sup>

Civil society, originally described by political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville, is composed of voluntary, non-political social organizations that strengthen democracy, thus helping prevent a “*tyranny of the majority*”.<sup>4</sup>

**Citizen engagement** is based on the idea that people have a right to a say in the decisions that affect their lives and that this is best accomplished through a two-way interaction between government and citizens. True citizen engagement encourages the sharing of power, information and a mutual respect between government and citizens. It emerged from the ideas of public participation, and [IAP2’s Public Participation Spectrum](#) (seen on page 3) is often used as a framework. It should be noted, however, that the first two categories “Inform” and “Consult” are not considered to be citizen engagement because they are not two-way interactions.

**Community engagement** is defined by the World Health Organization as “*a process by which people are enabled to become actively and genuinely involved in defining the issues of concern to them, in making decisions about factors that affect their lives, in formulating and implementing policies, in planning, developing and delivering services and in taking action to active change.*”<sup>6</sup> In general, community engagement refers to ways organizations engage constituents and the public in order to align their organizational goals, programs, and services with community interests and needs.<sup>7</sup>

Whereas, citizen engagement relates primarily to interactions between government and the general public, community engagement is used within a broader context to include efforts made by any institution or organization to connect with their clients, community and other stakeholders. However, even with government it seems that the term “community engagement” is becoming more popular.

There are many community engagement approaches and tools that can be used to involve community members in matters that may affect them. The approach, selected to suit the situation, may include: public consultations, town hall meetings, online discussions, surveys and interviews, participation in committees and task forces, and collaborative planning, implementation and evaluation.

For more on community engagement approaches, visit HC Link's [Community Engagement resource page](#).

## IAP2'S PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM

	----->>> ----->>> ----->>> ----->>> -----> Increasing impact on the decision				
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Source: [International Association for Public Participation, 2014](#)

## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN CANADA

There are issues, such as low voter turnout, which suggest that Canadians are disconnected from democratic structures and processes. While this lack of engagement is sometimes attributed to apathy, there are other findings that show people are looking for more meaningful ways to engage with their communities' political structures and decision-making. A 2005 citizen engagement poll revealed that:

- ▶ 85% of Canadians would be more confident in government decisions if it was clear that the government sought citizen's input more regularly, and
- ▶ 68% of Canadians believe there are not enough citizen engagement initiatives on issues of public policy.<sup>5</sup>

The apathy argument is also undermined by the fact that more and more people are becoming involved in groups and organizations in their communities. Statistics Canada has collected data on civic engagement through the General Social Survey (GSS) which, among other things, collects information on a variety of groups, organizations and associations of which Canadians are members. A report titled [Civic Engagement and Political Participation in Canada](#) compares data from the 2013, 2008, and 2003 surveys to look at the evolution of engagement and participation. The report shows that almost two-thirds (65%) of Canadians are members or participants in a group, organization or association, compared with 61% of Canadians a decade earlier. Sports and recreational organizations are the most popular, followed by unions or professional associations.

### PERCENT OF PEOPLE WHO WERE MEMBERS OR PARTICIPANTS IN A GROUP

TYPE OF GROUP OR ORGANIZATION	PERCENT
Sports or recreational organization	31
Union or professional association	28
Cultural, educational or hobby organization	20
School group, or neighbourhood, civic or community association	17
Religious-affiliated group	14
Service group	6
Seniors' group	6
Youth organization	5
Political party or group	4
Ethnic or immigrant association or club	3
Other type of organization	3

Source: [Statistics Canada, 2013 General Social Survey](#)

Other noteworthy findings from the GSS data:

- ▶ Older Canadians are leading the charge; the proportion of seniors age 75 and over who were members or participants was up 14% between 2003 and 2013, from 45% to 59%.
- ▶ According to the 2013 GSS, people who had a higher level of education were much more likely to be civically engaged; 78% of those with a university degree age 25 to 64 years were members or participants of a group, compared to 56% of those with a high school diploma and 41% of those without a high school diploma.
- ▶ Among people age 25 to 64, personal income was also positively associated with participation in groups; 81% of respondents with a personal income of \$80,000 or more per year were members or participants in a group, compared with 56% of those whose personal income was less than \$40,000 per year.<sup>8</sup>



**Civic Engagement in Walkerton, Ontario** (*Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, June 2014*)

Community members discuss rural transportation solutions with service providers and municipal staff

## BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES

Civic engagement ensures that civic decision-making at all levels is well-informed and transparent. When residents or consumers have the opportunity to express their wishes and needs on various policies and programs, they can help clarify the diversity and nuances of community values, needs and preferences. Public servants may then better understand multiple and sometimes conflicting perspectives on an issue, and the interaction between residents/consumers and decision-makers may lead to better relationships.

Civic engagement also aids in developing ongoing relationships among residents and community groups. From becoming better informed to participating in public dialogue on issues, from volunteering to voting, from community organizing to political advocacy, the defining characteristic of active civic engagement is the commitment to participate and contribute to the improvement of one's community, neighbourhood, and nation.<sup>6</sup>

By creating opportunities for youth civic engagement, policymakers promote the healthy development of young people. Through civic engagement activities youth may gain work experience, acquire new skills, and learn to handle responsibility, while developing new relationships and gaining a sense of satisfaction from contributing to their communities.<sup>9</sup>

The City of Victoria developed a [strategy](#) to improve civic engagement which it defined as “timely and meaningful citizen and stakeholder involvement in civic priority setting, decision-making, program development, and service delivery”. The report identifies several benefits to civic engagement:

- ▶ Enables policy makers and staff to hear new perspectives, learn new things, and gain more representative input to improve decision-making;
- ▶ Increases opportunities for community members to collaborate with government;
- ▶ Deepens citizens' impact on, understanding of, and ownership of the decisions reached;
- ▶ Greater accountability to and transparency for the public;
- ▶ Increases understanding between the public, staff, and elected officials;
- ▶ Reduces conflict between different interests;
- ▶ Improves service delivery and products; and
- ▶ More responsive to community needs/priorities.<sup>10</sup>



Of course, there are a myriad of challenges to civic engagement. Building strong, healthy communities is no easy feat, with many forces working against involvement in community life; for example, poverty, precarious work, competing demands, suburbanization, increased home entertainment, higher rates of mobility and globalization.

Many individuals and communities feel disconnected from public policy development and decision-making, resulting in lower voter turnout and cynicism about political accountability. This could also be attributed to increasing demands on our time and attention, confusion about when or how one will be consulted, or distrust that feedback will be used to affect change. As well, traditional ways of interacting (e.g., town hall meetings) may not be appealing to many people.

Inclusion is another significant challenge to civic engagement. Socially vulnerable groups such as Indigenous peoples, immigrants, refugees, racial/cultural minorities, and economically marginalized groups experience barriers to participating effectively in community and political life. There are often challenges associated with attaining leadership roles in non-profit community organizations, which are important vehicles for community members to become engaged in policy development and decision-making.



Community members contemplate actions to promote healthy built environments (*Ontario Healthy Communities Coalition, Toronto, October 2015*)

In its [report](#), the City of Victoria identified six key challenges to civic engagement:

- ▶ Confusion about the roles and responsibilities of engagement;
- ▶ Setting priorities when resources are scarce;
- ▶ Ensuring that engagement efforts are consistent and coordinated across departments and initiatives;
- ▶ Allocating resources for engagement;
- ▶ Ensuring effective communication about issues; and
- ▶ Engaging a diversity of stakeholders and citizens in civic engagement.<sup>10</sup>

## VEHICLES FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

A healthy community provides a supportive environment for community members to self-organize to make a difference in how their community and governments function. There are a number of establishments already in place in many communities that help foster civic engagement.

Many **libraries** see civic engagement as an important role and provide a range of facilities and services to support it, such as community meeting rooms, discussion groups and research services. Libraries are freely available to the public, in urban, suburban, and rural areas.<sup>11</sup>

**Arts and culture organizations** can also promote civic engagement. Through the arts, we can broaden community participation, give marginalized groups access to the civic realm, enhance public understanding of complex and often contentious issues, and motivate people to make change.<sup>12</sup> Animating Democracy's [Arts & Civic Engagement Impact Initiative](#) explores the power of art to illuminate civic experience and seeks to document concrete evidence of its impact.

**Service clubs** have long played an important role in our communities through such acts as building and operating recreational facilities and fundraising for special events and community needs.

**Municipalities** have a special role to play in creating a favourable climate for civic engagement by establishing civic or community engagement policies and improving the accessibility of municipal information and planning processes. The City of Toronto has created a user-friendly [online portal](#) where residents can learn about their city and how it works, various projects and consultations that are being undertaken, and how to stay connected through social media.

### Technology: A Tool for Engagement

Technology has changed the way in which we interact with our surroundings, from shopping to socializing, to civic engagement. While it's important to keep in mind that not everyone has access to the internet, the online world can offer people new opportunities to contribute to their communities. Participatory media, which includes social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, have opened up space for communication to flow, and technology has helped people overcome barriers of both information and opportunity.

Many municipalities in Ontario are using online technologies to increase access to information and data (e.g., where to vote), facilitate brainstorming and prioritizing of ideas (e.g., [Community PlanIt](#)), gather input to support community planning (e.g., Toronto's [pilot of participatory budgeting](#)), and stream Council meetings. There are also online platforms such as [18 Blocks](#), a virtual Toronto neighbourhood noticeboard, which helps "people discover how vibrant they are as a neighbourhood community and how much they have in common".



## CIVIC ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION

**The City of Victoria** developed and endorsed a [civic engagement strategy](#) to identify how to better communicate and connect with citizens. The process began in 2009 and included asking residents how the City can engage them in civic matters. Feedback highlighted six challenges for engagement, as well as over 60 recommendations. Additionally, Victoria incorporated four main structures as regular channels for civic engagement: advisory committees; neighbourhood associations; presentations to council by groups or citizens; and public dialogue sessions. The strategy also includes additional methods for engaging the public that complement these four structures, and suggests further efforts to develop the structures as engagement vehicles.

The [Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee](#) is an excellent example of grass roots civic engagement. The committee was started in 2008 by a group of women who met regularly at the small, rundown Toronto park, and saw an opportunity to strengthen their neighbourhood and their community through working together. Over the next few years, the Women's Committee helped improve the quality of green space in the park and increased accessibility to recreational opportunities. Through local celebrations and grassroots programming, including a weekly summer bazaar, food market, and activities for children, they created a vibrant economic, environmental, and social development in the park. What's more, the work that the committee has accomplished with the city's Public Health and Parks, Forestry and Recreation departments has had the added benefit of changing policy and practice city-wide, thereby removing barriers for other grassroots groups and community organizations working to improve their own public spaces.<sup>13</sup>

A number of organizations and municipalities are working towards the creation of a more inclusive community through civic participation. [The Hamilton Centre for Civic Inclusion](#) (HCCI) is a community-based organization that initiates and supports processes that promote equity and create inclusive environments in all areas of civic life. HCCI has played a key role in civic engagement by: providing newcomer training on civic participation; holding Conversation Cafés where people and politicians engage in discussion; facilitating youth leadership training; supporting ethno-specific associations and organizations; and holding workshops and training on diversity and inclusion.

[Diversity Thunder Bay](#) (DTB) is a group of individuals and representatives of organizations working to celebrate difference and end racism and discrimination. In keeping with its mission to foster a culturally-aware and equitable community, DTB encourages their member organizations to become more inclusive of diverse groups in Thunder Bay. They work to develop partnerships that address broader issues of diversity and inclusion and provide feedback on municipal policies, procedures and action plans.

Another approach to promoting civic engagement is through leadership positions in voluntary organizations.

[DiverseCity OnBoard](#) is a national program that connects individuals from visible minority and underrepresented immigrant communities to volunteer board positions. Recognizing that there are multiple barriers to participating in civic life for visible minorities and/or immigrants, DiverseCity OnBoard aims to boost diversity at non-profit and public agency boards. The organization has successfully made more than 700 board appointments.

The [Urban League of London](#) is another example of community coming together to affect local change. The League is a member-based group that includes a number of neighbourhood and ratepayer associations in the city of London, as well as community organizations concerned about environmental and heritage issues. Residents interested in urban or civic matters are also able to become members. The Urban League believes that strong and connected neighbourhoods are the building blocks of a vital, successful, and sustainable city, and that the engaged and informed citizen is the foundation of these strong and connected neighbourhoods. Members review proposals, research issues, and provide responses and presentations to the City, the Ontario Municipal Board and other open forums.

During an [HC Link webinar focused on reviewing Official Plans](#), Kate Hall described her experience in reviewing Haliburton County's Official Plan with the goal to increase active transportation. Kate is a professional planner and also a member of a local community group, Communities in Action (CIA), that is focused on improving active transportation options in Haliburton County. The group saw an opportunity to advance the work through the official plan (OP) policy review process. The approach that the group undertook included the following steps:

**Invite interested parties:** An invitation was sent out to all CIA members asking if they would like to be involved in the OP review process, and from there a subcommittee was created.

**Read through the Official Plan:** Members of the subcommittee all individually read through the OP and made notes on areas for change. They were also looking for existing supportive language - keywords, such as walking, cycling, trails, as well as key phrases.

**Get involved:** The group attended public meetings in order to make sure their voices were heard and their faces were known. They held a workshop to inform community members about the OP process and why they should get involved.

**Create a submission:** The group submitted a document that outlined what currently existed in the OP, alongside the new language or policy statements that the group was requesting be included. This document included key terms and definitions, something that was missing from the original OP.

## CONCLUSION

A healthy community embraces diversity and promotes equitable inclusion in all of its social, economic, political and cultural spheres. Civic engagement is a fundamental requirement for healthy communities. It fortifies democratic practices and institutions by promoting decision-making that takes into account the ideas, knowledge and wisdom that resides in the community. Voting and consultation processes are not enough; community members need to strengthen their voice and collectively take action to improve community conditions. Civic engagement sustains and enhances the capacity of all its members to build a caring and mutually responsible society in which everyone plays a role in economic and social well-being.

## RESOURCES

**Civic Engagement Webinar Series** (recordings, slides and resources) *HC Link, 2015-2016*

- ▶ [Engaging Citizens for Healthy Communities: Current challenges and approaches](#)
- ▶ [An Introduction to Engaging in the Review of your Official Plan](#)
- ▶ [Inclusive Civic Engagement](#)

**Animating Democracy** *Americans for the Arts*

A website that offers publications, tools, and other resources to learn more about arts-based civic engagement and social change.

**Citizen Engagement** *City of Victoria*

A website that includes the City's 2012 report, [Foundations for Success: A Strategy to Improve Civic Engagement](#).

**Creating Spaces for Change: Working toward a “story of now” in civic engagement** *W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2010*

A report of the outcomes of a dialogue among 40 US organizations from the U.S. about civic engagement, what it means and its goals.

**Handbook on Citizen Engagement: Beyond Consultation** *Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2008*

Provides an overview of engagement practices and resources to help plan citizen engagement projects.

**The Power of Civic Action** *Metcalf Foundation, 2015*

A report of Toronto's Thorncliffe Park Women's Committee that tells how they became empowered to create change for themselves, their community and the city.

**Public Engagement** *City of Edmonton*

A website that includes the City's 2008 report, [Involving Edmonton: A Public Involvement Initiative](#).

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization. “Trade, foreign policy, diplomacy and health – Civil Society”.

<sup>2</sup> Animating Democracy. “[Glossary](#)”.

<sup>3</sup> Leighninger, Matt. [Creating Spaces for Change: Working toward a “story of now” in civic engagement](#), (W. K. Kellogg Foundation, 2010): p.2.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, Peter D. “[de Tocqueville, Democracy, and the Crystallization of American Civil Society](#)”. *Documentary History of Philanthropy and Voluntarism in the United States, 1600-1900*, (Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, Harvard University).

<sup>5</sup> Sheedy, Amanda. [Handbook on Citizen Engagement: Beyond Consultation](#), (Canadian Policy Research Networks, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Fraser Health. [Community Engagement Framework](#), (2009): p.3.

<sup>7</sup> Animating Democracy. “[What is Social Change?](#)”.

<sup>8</sup> Turcotte, Martin. [Civic engagement and political participation in Canada](#), (Statistics Canada, 2015).

<sup>9</sup> Center for the Study of Social Policy. [Results-based Public Policy Strategies for Promoting Youth Civic Engagement](#), (2011).

<sup>10</sup> City of Victoria. [Foundations of Success: A Strategy to Improve Civic Engagement at the City of Victoria](#), (2012).

<sup>11</sup> Ricchiuto, Jack. “[The Civic Engagement Continuum for Libraries](#)”, (2013).

<sup>12</sup> Animating Democracy. “[Why This Initiative?](#)”.

<sup>13</sup> Webb, Margaret. [The Power of Civic Action](#), (Metcalf Foundation, 2015).

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To learn more about us or request a service, contact us at:

[www.HCLinkOntario.ca](http://www.HCLinkOntario.ca) | [info@hclinkontario.ca](mailto:info@hclinkontario.ca)

416-847-1575 | 1-855-847-1575

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