

# **Web-based citizen engagement as a tool for reducing cynicism in the planning process**

by

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# Introduction

## Historical Context

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Public participation is a central component of the decision-making process in the planning profession. Marked by a shift away from the rational comprehensive model in the latter part of the 20th century, more effective and accessible public participation is now the subject of renewed focus. However, despite this emphasis on a more inclusive process, many governments still struggle with negative public perceptions of the participatory process.

Prior to the mid-1900s, planning was a highly centralised affair. Whether because of monarchical authority or deference to professional expertise, land use planning did not traditionally consider the input of the general population (Shipley and Utz, 2012). For most of history, the layperson has been considered a passive recipient of planning decisions, rather than an active participant that can provide valuable input.

The 1960s saw a transformative change in planning theory that called into question the top-down model of land use planning. Thinkers such as Sherry Arnstein recognised that those who are impacted by centralised decisions often were subjected to the will of elite professionals who had little experience of the realities on the ground (Arnstein, 1967).

Since the 1980s, community participation has grown into the mainstream of the planning profession. For example, it is included in Ontario's Planning Act, which requires municipalities to consult the public when preparing Official Plans (Planning Act, 1990, S. 17).

While participatory planning methods were designed to give citizens more authority over planning decisions and increase transparency, some of the methods used today tend to reinforce cynical attitudes toward the planning process. Refinements and improvements to the public consultation process are necessary to ensure that planning and land use decisions are influenced by a broad cross-section of public interests.

## Research Question

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The immense growth in web-based communication since the advent of public participation theory has changed the way people interact with each other and engage with organisations. This stems from the assumption that web-based participation is generally seen as more open, more democratic, and easier to manage than traditional models of public consultation such as town hall meetings or workshops. Existing research suggests that it is easier for people with reduced physical mobility, financial constraints, or busy schedules to participate through a web-based process rather than a traditional consultation strategy (Baker et al., 2007; Shipley and Feick, 2009).

The effectiveness of current public consultation methods is in question. Success is hampered by, among other things, the cynicism with which participants perceive the process. The purpose of this Senior Honours Essay is to determine the effectiveness of web-based tools in reducing cynicism and, as a result, making the public consultation process more effective.

To explore this question, this study will analyse an example from Toronto, Ontario. In the summer of 2011, the City of Toronto embarked on a Service Review - a comprehensive analysis of the services provided by the City. This review included a significant web-based public consultation component, which was intended to inform decisions about how to allocate the following year's budget. I will use a theoretical framework based on established research to evaluate the degree to which the Toronto Service Review impacted feelings of cynicism toward the public consultation process.

# Literature review

## Theory of participation

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Public participation is the act of engaging citizens to identify problems, develop solutions, and determine the implementation of these problems. Participation processes may incorporate one or more of these procedures (Shipley and Utz, 2012). Defined another way, “It is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic processes, to be deliberately included in the future” (Arnstein, 1967).

Sherry Arnstein’s definition of participation touches on themes that are rooted in the civil rights movement and student protests of the 1960s. These include the representation of disadvantaged demographic groups, and the ability for citizens to have real decision-making power (Arnstein, 1967).

A vast amount of research has since built upon Arnstein's definition of participation, and provides a more well-rounded set of typologies for determining the dimensions of effective participation. In addition to the delegation of power to ordinary citizens, factors such as demographic representation and dialogue between participants can be evaluated for a more robust analysis of effective participation (McCool and Guthrie, 2001; Tuler and Webler, 1999).

Despite the importance of evaluating the process of participation, the true long-term value of civic engagement lies in its ability to decentralise the decision-making process. While some participants may be satisfied for a short time with simply being engaged and not necessarily having any power to influence policy, that satisfaction can give way to cynical attitudes if their input seems to have been ignored (Shipley et al., 2004; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004).

## Defining goals

A four-part rationale for public participation was set out by Innes and Booher (2004) to identify what the goals of participation should be: discerning public preferences, incorporating local knowledge into decision-making, advancing fairness and justice, and enhancing legitimacy of public decisions.

Irvin and Stansbury (2004) propose a slightly different, but related, set of goals: public education, citizen control over policy, and breaking gridlock in politically divisive issues. They also mention that from the government's perspective, public participation can build legitimacy and strategic alliances under the right conditions.

These approaches focus heavily on the end result of public participation to judge its success. This theory is supported by observations in the literature that the degree to which one can influence decisions determines one's willingness to invest time in a public participation process (Conroy 2011, Irvin and Stansbury 2004, McCool and Guthrie 2001).

Halvorsen's (2003) goals for effective participation, on the other hand, are centred more around the process of consultation rather than the product of decisionmaking. She states that public consultation ought to be satisfying, accessible, and deliberative in order to be effective. The experiences of participants in a United States Forestry Service public consultation process were analysed to determine whether high-quality public participation can change one's perceptions of government. Three "beliefs indices" were determined to assess changes in public perception: 1) Perception of performance, 2) perception of responsiveness, and 3) perception of the value of other voices. The study sought to determine whether high-quality participation influenced the participants' beliefs indices.

Another study of participants' attitudes toward the process yielded much different results. By cataloguing the dimensions of success as defined by participants, McCool and Guthrie (2001) found that the public has growing misgivings about the expert-driven planning model. Some participants were jaded by previous encounters where others were not willing to learn or were not open to opposing viewpoints. Just as positive, credible relationships can carry over and set the tone for future meetings, so too can negative experiences. Participants' time must be valued by making sure that concerns can be addressed and that the public input has an influence.

Possibly the most unexpected finding of McCool and Guthrie's (2001) study, which runs up against Halvorsen's (2003) findings, was that participants did *not* identify collaboration as a measure of success. This is curious because collaboration is often touted by academics as one of the benefits of

participation (Innes and Booher, 2004; McCool and Guthrie, 2001). McCool and Guthrie's finding points to the overwhelming importance of the end result, rather than sole reliance on process-oriented goals.

Public participation often has limited success because it sidesteps an actual policy decision. If citizens are deluded into thinking that their input will have more weight than it actually does, it is certain to cause dissatisfaction and public cynicism that can negatively impact future attempts at consultation (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004).

The self-transformation theory supports the role of democratic engagement in changing peoples' attitudes and perceptions (Warren, 1992). It recognises that some situations are more likely to benefit from public consultation than others. Issues which affect the public at large, such as transportation or infrastructure projects, would benefit from a public process more so than, for example, internal hiring decisions. Warren's theory of self-transformation lays out a typology of "goods" that can be the focus of deliberation. Two of these goods (public material goods and social identity goods) require a public participation component, as they necessitate "common deliberation and action" in order to be realised.

Public material goods are individual in nature (one benefits more from keeping them to herself), non-excludable (if they are provided to one, they must be provided to all), material (they satisfy a physical need), and scarce. This includes goods such as roads, parks, and public institutions.

Social identity goods are social in nature (their benefits are shared among all members of society), symbolic (they do not satisfy a physical need), and non-scarce. The characteristic it shares with public material goods is that they are both non-excludable. An example of a social identity good could be a defined culture or shared values.

It is impossible to make fair decisions about these two types of goods in a vacuum, because their existence by nature implicates everyone in the community. These typologies can help determine what kinds of issues would be best suited to public deliberation.

**Table 1: Summary of theories of participation**

Article	Dimensions of effective participation
Arnstein (1967)	Ability for have-nots to “induce significant social reform which enables them to share in the benefits of the affluent society”
Tuler and Webler (1999)	Access to the process; Power to influence power and outcomes; Access to information; Structural characteristics to promote interactions; Facilitation of constructive personal behaviours; Improving social conditions for future processes; and Adequate analysis
Innes and Booher (2004)	Joint fact finding (allows participants to question data and present their own information); Ratification of end result by voters; Inclusive set of participants; Participants are equally informed and empowered; belief in ability to make a difference; and Formal and informal interaction between participants (more than a two-way dialogue)
Irvin and Stansbury (2004)	Representative group of stakeholders; Transparent decision-making process; Clear authority in decision-making; Competent and unbiased group facilitators; Regular meetings; and Adequate financial resources
Halvorsen (2003)	Comfortable and convenient meetings; Satisfying, meaningful discussion; and Visible impact on agency decisions
McCool and Guthrie (2001)	Preparation and implementation of a plan; Social and Political acceptability; Learning (content and process); Responsibility, sense of ownership (input is considered and reflected); Building credible relationships (two-way and within participants); and Representation of interests
Warren (1992)	Consultation is related to a non-excludable good (either a public material good or a social identity good)



## Determining the dimensions of effective participation

In order to evaluate the criteria for effective participation listed in Table 1, there must be a measurable component. Therefore, the dimensions of effective participation ought to be aspects of the consultation process which can be observed.

While there are many different ways to evaluate the effectiveness of public participation, they tend to follow similar broad themes. The following list of dimensions is informed by the findings in the literature and forms a good framework for evaluating the effectiveness of participation efforts:

- **Decision-making power.** The decisions that arise out of a consultation process should be strongly related to the input that was received. The central purpose of public participation is to decentralise the decision-making process. This purpose ought to be reflected in the final decision.
- **Dialogue.** Public participation should encourage the free flow of ideas and opinions between participants and administrators. The ability for participants to actively share their input, rather than be limited to a defensive or responsive position, is essential to the legitimacy of consultation.
- **Representation.** Ideally, public consultation should reflect society as a whole. Diverse demographic backgrounds and special interests ought to be adequately represented.
- **Education.** Public participation efforts are most effective when they allow people to learn about all sides of an issue. Participants should also understand the roles of all parties involved in the decision-making process.
- **Public ratification.** Perhaps the ultimate test of effectiveness is the degree to which the general population supports the end result. A post-consultation analysis of the public's satisfaction is essential in determining how to improve the participation process.

This list of dimensions is not exhaustive, but captures the essence of what much of the literature defines as the qualities of effective public participation processes. This essay will use the above dimensions as a rubric to evaluate the consultation efforts of the Toronto Service Review.

## Evaluating participation

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This section will explore the dimensions established above in greater detail, based on findings from the literature.

### **Decision-making power**

Public participation should be evaluated on the merits of its ability to put decision-making power in the hands of the general public (Innes and Booher, 2004; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; Conroy, 2011). If public participation is sought only in the later stages of the decision-making process, participants may feel that their engagement is somewhat of an afterthought, and not a genuine attempt to make policy decisions. Furthermore, there is potential for divisiveness if public hearings are held late in the process (Conroy 2011, Duram and Brown 1999, McCool and Guthrie 2001).

One case of participative watershed planning in Ohio actively recruited participants that claimed to have an interest in the topic. However, the initiative suffered from a lack of interest among the participants, and the process collapsed altogether. In a post-mortem survey, the respondents indicated that engaging the public earlier on in the decision-making process would have increased the likelihood of participation (Conroy 2011).

McCool and Guthrie (2001) note the need for feedback (and especially negative feedback) to occur early in the decision-making process to be effective in influencing those decisions. This statement dovetails with the evidence put forth by Conroy (2011).

Much of the research concludes that if a group of citizens will not have any actual authority to make or influence decisions, there is little benefit to doing public participation in the first place (Arnstein, 1967; Irvin and Stansbury 2004). This theory is contested by the results of case studies which show that citizens can feel empowered by the participation process even if their input does not influence the outcome (Brownill and Carpenter 2007, Halvorsen 2003).

Although successful public participation can be had without a change in policy, it is important to take into account the history behind public participation. It was not intended to make citizens simply *feel*

empowered, but to actually empower them with decisionmaking ability. Using local knowledge is integral to the formulation of policies that respect and represent the will of the people.

## **Dialogue**

In public participation scenarios, past exposure to “satisfying” meetings has been found to reduce the value that participants place on others’ opinions. This implies an inverse relationship between satisfaction and the deliberative quality of a meeting. Conversely, the perceived value of other voices increased if the participants had past exposure to “comfortable” or “convenient” meetings (Halvorsen 2003). These findings suggest that public participation should be comfortable and convenient, but not necessarily satisfying, in order to foster an appreciation for the concerns of multiple stakeholders.

Interestingly, Halvorsen (2003) notes that participants’ perceptions of the United States Forestry Service did change significantly despite their lack of concrete decision-making power. These findings contradict the conclusions of other research, which has found that the ability of members of the public to directly influence policy is the central component of successful participation. (Innes and Booher, 2004; Irvin and Stansbury, 2004; and Conroy, 2011). By focusing on a measure of success other than decision-making power, Halvorsen has identified aspects of the participation process that can increase participants’ willingness to engage in dialogue with those that have different opinions.

## **Representation**

A common theme in the literature for evaluating participation is to ensure that the group of participants is representative of the greater population. Most authors recognise the need for adequate representation, but do not explain how to determine, in practical terms, whether this adequacy has been achieved. For example, Brownill and Carpenter (2007) advocate for the active recruitment of minorities and women in the planning process to ensure participation among a broad cross-section of the population. However, these solutions speak only in terms of general strategies.

A measurable approach is taken by Conway (2011), who uses demographic information such as age, gender, and neighbourhood character to determine how significantly the pool of participants

deviates from the norm. In the watershed planning survey undertaken by Conway, the participants were found to be more rural, older, and overwhelmingly male compared to the community as a whole. This objective measurement of adequate representation is a key component in determining the effectiveness of participation.

Multiple modes of participation can help reduce cynicism in the planning process. This is explained, in part, by the fact that different sections of the population are most attuned to different forms of communication. Younger citizens may find online communication and social media to be most convenient for them. Older generations may, as Conway (2011) found, perceive that online consultation diminishes the legitimacy of the process.

In a case study undertaken by Brownill and Carpenter (2007), extensive efforts were taken to ensure representation and accessibility in the participation process. Due to this effort, people claimed to be empowered by the involvement even though they did not have any decision-making authority.

## **Education**

One of the core principles of participatory planning is to educate people to the extent that they can make an informed, independent decision about policies that affect them (Bailey, 2010). Asking for feedback without context, or simply providing information without adequate explanation, does not contribute to effective public participation. Education in the context of public consultation means to explain, in accessible terms, all sides of an issue. In this respect, it has strong ties to the representation of different interests.

Educating participants to help them understand opposing viewpoints is a key factor in overcoming polarised, unproductive debate, as was found in case studies from Chicago and Johannesburg. “These events, whilst well intentioned, were largely negative and crystallized community differences rather than built deliberative spaces, and gave little hope for standard participation if not contextualized.” (Beebejaun and Vanderhoven, 2010)

When equipped with a comprehensive knowledge of the issues at hand, participants are more likely to make concessions and work together in a deliberative fashion with other interested parties. Sturzaker (2011) notes that the “adversarial nature” of traditional public consultation processes tends to reinforce preconceived opinions and inhibits constructive dialogue.

## **Public ratification**

After a decision has been made as a result of a public participation process, the clearest measure of effectiveness is the level of public satisfaction. Without public ratification of the outcomes, it is difficult to determine whether the participation process exemplifies the dimensions of dialogue, decision-making power, representation, and education. “Proposals that genuinely derive from a community-based plan or a broad-based community drive for development appear to stand more chance of receiving the support of that community.” (Sturzaker, 2011)

In her “Ladder of Citizen Participation”, Sherry Arnstein describes the highest rung - delegated power - as a state of affairs in which “citizens hold the significant cards to assure accountability of the program to them.” (Arnstein, 1967, p. 222) Whereas most planning decisions do not delegate power directly to ordinary citizens, the accountability of a government to its people is a basic tenet of participation and should be evaluated at the conclusion of any public consultation process.

It is important that all members of the public, not just those who participated, are included in the post-consultation evaluation of a decision. An opinion survey of the broader population can help to bring issues of representation and accessibility to light.

## **Barriers to participation**

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### **Expectations**

Cynicism in public participation is not limited to the feelings of the general public. While most of the literature on this topic focuses on cynical attitudes toward public administrators, the administrators themselves are not always committed to public participation. Skepticism on the part of governments

arises from the sense that participation is too costly and does not produce good or efficient decision-making (Innes and Booher, 2004).

Shipley, Feick, Hall, and Earley (2004) highlight the discord that can occur when administrators and participants have different expectations for the outcome of a public participation process. While public administrators thought of the process as an abstract exercise, members of the public expected to achieve more specific results. Even if the process of participation itself was a good experience, in retrospect participants felt that their involvement did not play a role in decision making. When these expectations are not fulfilled or addressed, cynicism can take hold in the public consciousness.

Berman (1997) explains that cynicism arises from distrust and a lack of social capital. He identifies three types of strategies, categorised loosely by their intended outcome. Information strategies seek to inform and explain. Participation strategies open the flow of communication and allow citizens to make their voices heard or vote on specific issues. Lastly, reputation strategies attempt to portray a positive image or actively counter negative feelings towards government. In Berman's study, public administrators saw a significant decline in cynicism when two or more of these strategies were used in tandem to combat cynicism.

Another limitation identified by Innes and Booher (2004) is that many governments fail to aim for the ideal, and instead adhere to the minimum mandated requirements. This approach can backfire, and cause public participation processes that act as a deterrent to participation by engendering distrust.

## **Practical Barriers**

Aside from these perceptual barriers, the practical barriers of time and money must also be addressed. Ensuring that a project has adequate financial support for a full and accessible consultation will help to ensure successful participation.

Conroy (2011) notes that meeting the ideal of a public participation process is hampered by government constraints, including time, budget, and personnel shortages. Accessibility by the general public is also a concern, as many would-be participants do not contribute to the process due to schedule

conflicts, financial limitations, and the perceived ability to make a meaningful contribution (Brownill and Carpenter 2007).

Participants' interest in the topic at hand is important, but interest in the topic does not necessarily equate to interest in the consultation process. Other factors such as inconvenient meeting times, perceived ineffectiveness of the process, and lack of incentives can cause public participation efforts to fail. Although topic knowledge is a major factor in participants' willingness to be involved, it is not the only one (Conroy 2011).

## **Atmosphere**

Halvorsen (2003) makes an important distinction between physical accessibility - overcoming the factors that prevent one from attending a public participation event - and a more comprehensive version of accessibility, which requires participants to feel free to be open about their views without being ostracised or made uncomfortable. Therefore, a relaxed, non-adversarial setting is important for effective public participation.

Traditional citizen participation tends to attract overly partisan participants and those who are directly affected by the resulting decisions. These parties, while interested in the topic, are not likely to be representative of the community at large and may pursue narrow or self-serving agendas. It is important to note that cynicism of the public participation process is not always directed toward the governments that organise them (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004).

## **Web-based techniques**

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Many participation methods currently in widespread use were originally intended to leverage the general will. In the late 1990s, municipalities increasingly adopted new tools for consultation such as citizen's juries, focus groups, and visioning exercises (Leach and Wingfield, 2008). These methods were effective in making participation more representative by reaching out to specific subsets of the population, and were a progressive step towards increased accessibility. However, there are still significant barriers for both administrators and participants.

The literature is consistent in its conclusions that one-way communication is less successful than a two-way dialogue (Duram and Brown 1999, McCool and Guthrie 2001). From a survey of 126 watershed planning initiatives in the United States, Duram and Brown (1999) found that in-person information programs, newsletters, and door-to-door contact were the most effective vehicles for engaging the public. Unfortunately, no web-based methods of communication were included in the survey to compare with some of the more traditional public participation efforts. It is generally agreed, however, that a multi-pronged approach is best to reach the widest possible range of citizens. When integrated with a formal planning process, online consultation can help to reach members of the public that would not otherwise be enticed to provide their input (Evans-Cowley and Hollander, 2010).

There is no definitive consensus on the effectiveness of web-based participation. In one Ohio-based watershed planning process, online tools were identified as a deterrent to public participation as they appeared to lower the perceived behavioural control of participants. In that case, there was a perception that online participation is not as effective or legitimate as attending an in-person meeting or sitting on an advisory board (Conroy 2011). However, this disposition toward web-based approaches may not be generalisable to other public participation processes, as the participants in the Ohio case were not representative of the broader community. The participants were overwhelmingly older, male, and more rural than the community as a whole.

A comfortable and non-threatening atmosphere is one of the dimensions that has been found to contribute to meaningful public participation (Halvorsen 2003). It is unclear whether web-based tools help or hinder the comfortable nature of a public participation session. On one hand, people can contribute to discussion from the comfort and convenience of their own homes. On the other hand, the anonymity of an online forum has the potential to facilitate extremism and adversarial debate.

The lack of financial resources is often cited as a cause for the failure of public participation efforts. In comparing the web-based component of a public consultation process to its corresponding in-person component, Shipley and Feick (2009) found that the web-based approach lowered costs, allowed for larger numbers of respondents, and increased flexibility. Web-based technologies may alleviate the



high cost of managing a large, representative group and make it easier to achieve legitimacy in public decision-making.

Collaborative online mapping technology allows for public input that is rich with geographic data, which helps tie general public opinion to the physical land use aspects of planning (Shiple and Feick 2009). This facilitates a truer fulfilment of the ideals of citizen-directed decision-making. When used in the public participation process, online mapping tools remove a level of abstraction and allow people to relate to the project or problem more directly.

Brownill and Carpenter (2007) note a lack of evidence as to whether web-based techniques can overcome the perennial barriers of government funding and staffing shortages. The case of watershed planning in Ohio (Conroy 2011) suggests that it lessens the incentive to participate. Conversely, web-based technologies have also been shown to facilitate gathering a multitude of rich data and allow more direct decision-making than is possible with traditional consultation methods (Shiple and Feick, 2009).

## Gaps in the literature

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The common practical limitations that surround participatory planning - inconvenience, cost, management of large groups of people - can be reduced by incorporating web-based tools as part of a comprehensive public participation strategy. However, there is some uncertainty in the literature as to whether web-based tools are a benefit or a hindrance to the public participation process as a whole.

More research should be done to establish what kinds of web-based engagement can make public participation more successful. Specifically, it is not clear whether online engagement is perceived simply as another faceless, top-down communication method. Not all segments of the population will embrace virtual participation, so it is important to identify what kinds of projects and jurisdictions would be most suited for web-based engagement.

In the analysis of the Toronto Service Review, I will attempt to determine whether web-based participation strategies can reduce cynicism more readily than the traditional methods of citizen engagement.

# Methods

## Definitions

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As this essay seeks to evaluate the efficacy of web-based participation methods, the scope must take into account this technological component. Therefore, for the purposes of this essay, the terms “web-based participation”, “online participation”, “web-based engagement”, and variations thereof shall have the same meaning: “The solicitation of broad-based public input via the World Wide Web”. The key words in this definition must be clarified:

**Solicitation:** Solicitation implies an active, organised effort around a specific goal or decision. A simple contact form or social media button is not sufficient to be deemed “web-based participation” in the planning process.

**Broad-based public input:** The use of web-based technologies have the potential to reach larger numbers of people than traditional formats. However, they are not always designed to do so. Engagement must be broad-based in that it must be intended for use by the general public, not just a small subset of pre-selected individuals.

**World Wide Web:** Web-based participation includes involvement from participants on any kind of internet-connected device - the web is about more than just computers. This study will not evaluate public comments based on their source of input (e.g. smartphone, library computer, or laptop), only the fact that it was transmitted via the World Wide Web.

## Case study selection

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The Toronto Service Review is an excellent case study to evaluate web-based participation, as it exhibits the qualities that are identified in the literature as useful and beneficial for effective public consultation. The political climate in Toronto at the time of the Service Review was extremely polarised,

and ordinary citizens became highly involved in the discussion around taxes, user fees, and public services.

A new mayor had been elected in Toronto the previous fall, and the preparations for the 2012 budget indicated a significant change in political direction from the previous administration. In addition to the politically-charged climate and strong differences of opinion, the Service Review was conducted far enough in advance of the budget deadline - roughly six months - to assure participants that it was undertaken in good faith and not an act of tokenism.

Many studies note the importance of timing in the public participation process, concluding that early and continued communication is more effective than token participation in the later stages (Conroy, 2011; McCool and Guthrie, 2001).

Public participation was found to be most useful when identifying issues, prioritising issues, and in outreach. These typically occur in the preliminary stages of policy development. Conversely, public participation is less useful for clarifying issues, selecting a planning approach, drafting a plan, or holding review hearings. This information confirms the general consensus of the literature that public participation is more effective nearer to the beginning of the decision-making process (Duram and Brown, 1999).

Other research shows that participation is most needed where there are strong differences of opinion or hostility towards unilateral government decision-making (Irvin and Stansbury, 2004). The problem with these findings is that it is difficult to assess whether hostility or strong differences of opinion exist without actually engaging in some consultation to gauge the public mood. This presents obvious challenges when attempting to make the most of scarce resources to ensure effective public participation.

Public participation, for all its benefits, is not always in the public interest. Irvin and Stansbury (2004) observe that it is unclear whether public participation inherently makes citizens more sympathetic to their government. Where communities are complacent, a top-down structure is more efficient and preferable to public meetings that may become dominated by unelected special-interest groups.

Irvin and Stansbury (2004) identified the conditions under which public participation would have a high or low degree of benefit. Participation was found to be worthwhile (i.e. of high benefit) if there was a high degree of hostility toward government decision-makers, and if the participation was managed by a credible facilitator. In such a situation, the power of validation rests in the public's hands and people are more likely to understand each other and learn from their peers (McCool and Guthrie 2001).

The Service Review survey solicited feedback from Torontonians on a number of budget-related questions that involved prioritising some public services over others. Many of the services, such as police, transit, and waste collection, fit the criteria of a public material good in Warren's typology of goods. Others, such as funding for environmental programs and live theatres, imply value judgments that can be examined as social identity goods.

## Brief summary of research methods

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The findings presented below were obtained largely from a report written by Toronto's City Manager to inform the Executive Committee of the results of the Service Review (City of Toronto, 2011). This report identified the major themes of participants' feedback, summarised the responses to each question of the survey, and presented demographic information about the respondents.

As the survey and consultation process was intended to inform decisionmaking about the 2012 budget, there were specific questions relating to topics such as tax increases and service prioritisation. The survey also asked open-ended questions about the city's operations. All in all, the survey presents a robust reserve of information about public opinion that can be analysed in terms of the dimensions of effective participation.

To assess the decision-making power of the citizens that participated in the online consultation process, the responses from the survey were compared with the actual 2012 budget to determine to what extent the budget reflected the general will of the survey respondents.

To evaluate representation, the demographic information gleaned from the surveys was compared against census statistics for the City of Toronto.

The ability of the survey to facilitate dialogue and education was evaluated by looking at the structure of the survey and the kinds of responses that were given for open-ended questions.

To assess public ratification of the budget, opinion surveys conducted after the budget's release were consulted.

# Findings

## Introduction

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In the summer of 2011, the City of Toronto undertook an extensive public consultation process called the Toronto Service Review. The purpose of this exercise was to address the budget shortfall of \$774 million by finding efficiencies, determining which services could be reduced, and gauging what level of property tax increase could be supported by the public. (More information is available at <http://www.toronto.ca/torontoservicereview/>.)

One element of the Toronto Services Review was a public opinion survey that specifically looked at 35 services provided by the City and asked members of the public which ones were most necessary, which ones should be provided by the City, and how to pay for them, among other questions.

The Service Review consultation survey (hereafter referred to as “the survey”) was provided both online and in hard copy, with an identical set of questions. The survey incorporated both quantitative and qualitative questions to solicit input. In total, 12,955 members of the public participated. 12,372 responses (over 95%) were completed online. Although the data collected does not distinguish between online and paper submissions, the overwhelming majority of participants chose to use the web-based tool, and it can be reasonably assumed that the major trends of the data reflect the input of online participants (Cowley, 2012).

After the public consultation period was complete, the results were released in a report by the City Manager to the Executive Committee in September 2011. This report summarised the participants’ responses and presented a picture of what services Torontonians value.

In order to weigh the City’s priorities against those of the survey respondents, I distilled the public’s priorities from the City Manager’s report and compared them with the program spending of the 2012 operating budget. A noticeable correlation between the two sets of priorities would indicate that the

public consultation process allowed citizens to tangibly influence the decisions of their government, which is a central aspect of reducing public cynicism.

Aside from the budget, staff recommendations on user fees and property tax increases were also compared with survey responses to gauge the level of citizen influence in the decision-making process.

## Demographic representation

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At the time of writing, the 2011 Census results were not available for demographic indicators. Therefore, data from the 2006 Census has been used to assess the demographic representation of the survey results. It should be noted that the Service Review feedback period (May 11 - June 17, 2011) closely aligns with the 2011 Census reference day (May 10, 2011). It may be beneficial to update the analysis of demographic representation when the relevant 2011 Census data becomes available.

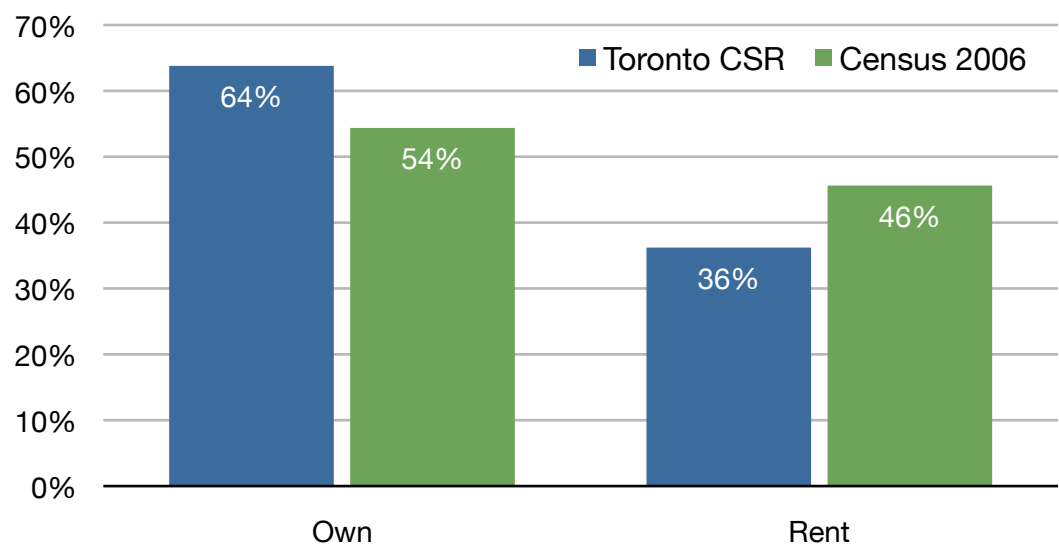
Roughly 9,000 of the 12,955 participants elected to answer some or all of the demographic information questions at the end of the survey. As these questions were optional, they do not have the same statistical accuracy as the mandatory responses of the Census. However, the large number of responses allows for a general picture of the demographic makeup of the survey respondents.

Males accounted for 47.9% of participants, and 51.4% were female. Although 0.7% of participants identified as transgendered, they have been omitted from my gender analysis because the Census data does not include transgendered counts. Taking this into consideration, the survey respondents' gender distribution aligns with the Census information for the City of Toronto.

28% of participants had children, compared with a figure of 26% in the Census. While these figures imply a good representation, they may not be directly comparable, for three reasons. First, the survey measured responses from individuals, whereas the Census measures responses from households. Second, the Census figure only incorporates *couples* with children; it does not include single-parent households. Lastly, different age thresholds are used by the Census (25 years) and the survey (18 years) to define "children". Therefore, while the survey responses appear to be representative of the general population, it is a rough estimate at best.

The survey featured a slight overrepresentation of owners rather than renters. 64% of participants were owners, compared to 54% in the Census. 36% of participants were renters, compared to 46% in the Census. Once again, these figures are not directly comparable because the Census proportions are based on households, whereas the survey counted individuals. That said, it appears that the opinions of renters may be slightly underrepresented in the Service Review survey results.

**Figure 1: Tenure type**

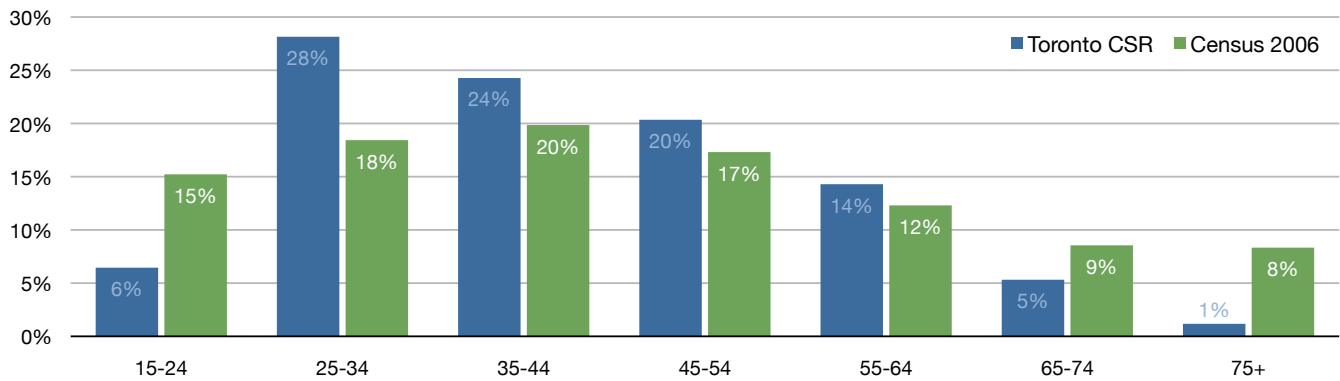


*Chart created by author based on data from City of Toronto (2011).*

The age distribution of participants shows that people aged 25-34 are the most overrepresented group, and that youth (15-24) and the elderly (65+) are the most underrepresented age groups. It should be noted that there were only 4 respondents under the age of 15 in the survey; those responses were not included in the findings of the City Manager’s report. Therefore, they have not been included in this analysis of demographic representation either.



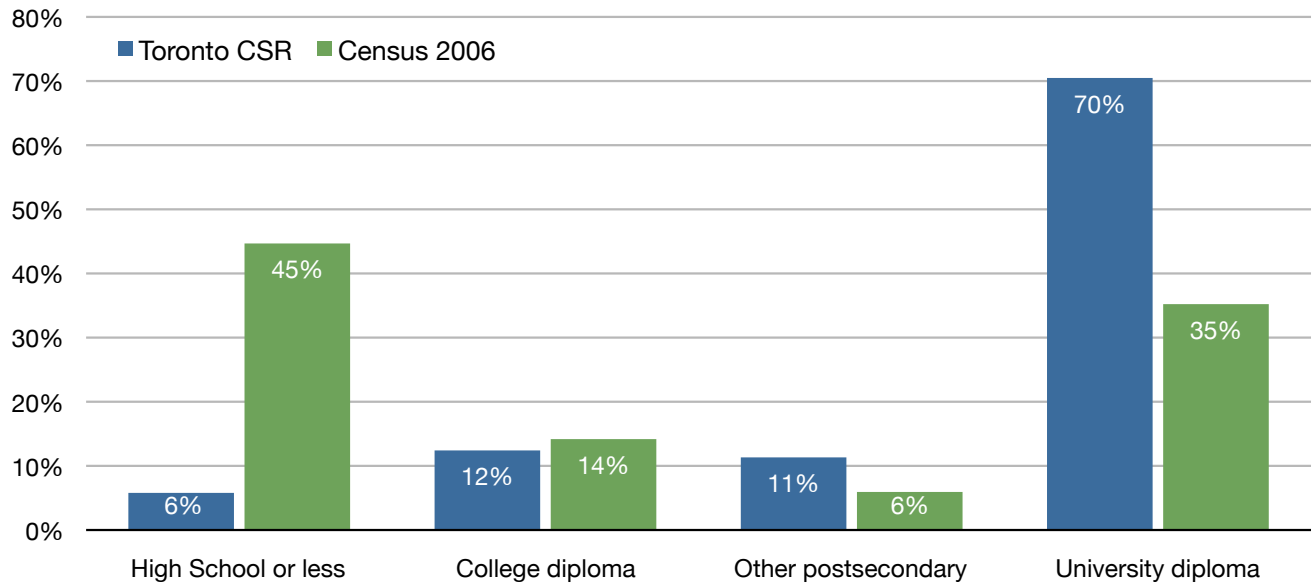
**Figure 2: Age distribution**



*Chart created by author based on data from City of Toronto (2011).*

The distribution of education levels shows that there is an overrepresentation of university-educated respondents (70% compared to 35% in the Census), and a severe underrepresentation of those with a high school level of education or less (6% compared to 45% in the Census). It should be noted that the definitions of education levels differ slightly between the survey and the Census, so some of the education levels used in the Census have been combined to roughly align with the four categories used in the survey.

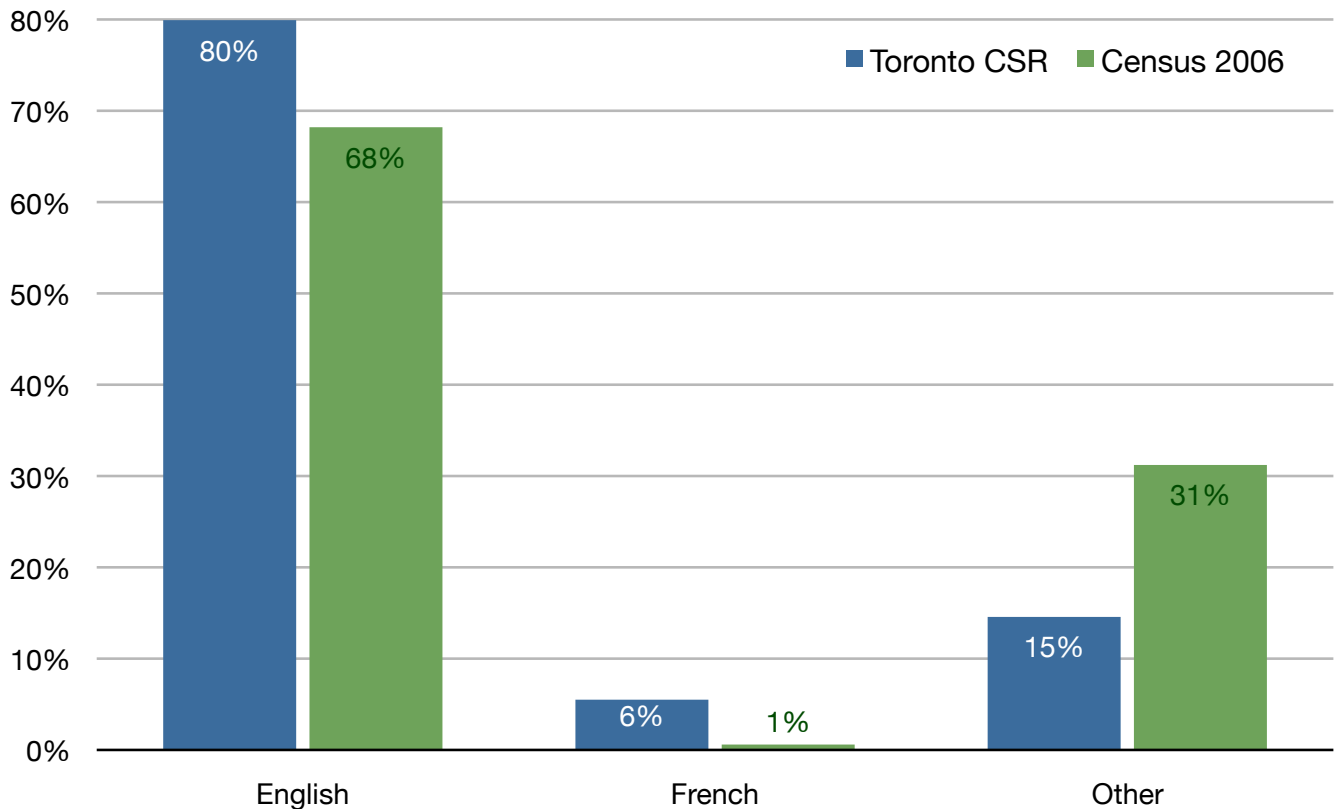
**Figure 3: Education levels**



*Chart created by author based on data from City of Toronto (2011).*

In developing the survey, City staff recognised the need to provide accessibility for people whose first language is not English or French. In addition to the two official languages, The survey was translated into 10 other languages. Despite these efforts, English- and French-speaking respondents remained overrepresented in the survey results. Those speaking a language other than English or French made up 15% of responses, while they make up 31% of Toronto's population. Again, this comparison of data may not be reliable due to the Census' measurement of households rather than individuals, and because the Census uses slightly different language categories than the survey.

**Figure 4: Languages spoken**



*Chart created by author based on data from City of Toronto (2011).*

In terms of geographic representation, the results of the survey provide a roughly adequate distribution of responses. However, respondents in the downtown area and the inner suburbs seem to be overrepresented compared to those living nearer to the city limits. The pockets of population density in the outer suburbs (see Map 1) do not correlate to a comparable response rate (see Map 2).

In conclusion, the survey responses appear to be skewed towards downtown residents, those who have a university education, are between the ages of 25-34, or speak English or French. A moderate overrepresentation was observed for those who own rather than rent. Gender and the proportion of respondents with children appear to be well-represented.

## Findings

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### **Most important policy issues**

Participants ranked the importance of nine broad policy issues on a Likert scale ranging from “Not important” to “Extremely important”. The responses were then translated to mean scores out of 100 points.

Two of these issues were process-oriented, and seven were focused on more concrete policy positions, such as infrastructure, taxes, and environmental issues. “Transparent and accountable government”, one of the process-oriented issues, ranked highest with a mean score of nearly 90/100. “Community participation and consultation” placed significantly lower in sixth place, with a mean score of nearly 80/100.

While both issues could be said to be important in absolute terms, the results indicate a strong desire among respondents to see a tangible result from the consultation process, and for the public to hold decisionmakers to account rather than just to participate for the sake of being involved. The focus on transparency and accountability as the most important policy issues implies a high degree of cynicism among the respondents.

The issues of infrastructure, meeting the needs of vulnerable people, environmental issues, and jobs and a healthy economy were all deemed more important than “Community participation and consultation”. This indicates that the respondents do not see an inherent value in the participation process, and would rather have some material issues take precedence over consultation if that consultation may not lead to transparency and accountability.

### **Most necessary services**

For each of the 35 service areas identified in the survey, participants assigned a category based on its necessity: “Necessary for the city”, “Contributes to the city but less important”, or “Not required for the

city”. The City Manager’s report indicates that answers for this section were generally consistent across demographic groups.

Public transit (i.e. TTC), Fire Services, Water treatment and distribution, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) were ranked highest, with over 90% of respondents categorising these services as “Necessary for the city”. City-run live theatres, the Toronto Zoo, Exhibition Place, and Managing courts for provincial offenses were deemed least necessary, with over 30% of respondents categorising them as “Not required for the city”. See Appendix A for the full ranking list.

### **Preferred funding scheme**

After ranking the importance of the different services, participants were asked what the best funding mechanism would be to pay for them. The results indicate a preference for increasing property taxes rather than user fees, though there is little public appetite for a large increase in taxes and fees, even if it would expand services. Respondents clearly preferred to maintain the same level of services with a moderate increase in fees and taxes rather than a significant jump in cost or a reduction of services. This strong aversion to service cuts was consistent across all demographic and geographic groups.

### **Property tax increases**

When questioned further about the level of property tax increases that respondents would be willing to tolerate, a clear consensus did not emerge.

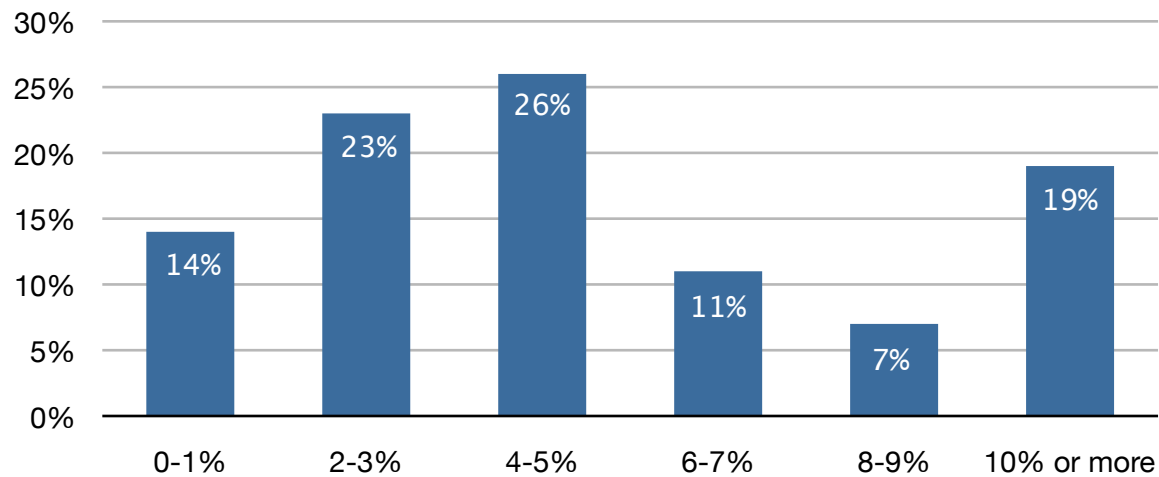
Rather than specifying the exact percentage of tax increase they felt was appropriate, participants were only able to choose between 0% and 10%. The large amount of responses in the 10% category indicates that there may be many participants who were willing to increase their property taxes by more than 10%, but there is no way to identify the true upper limit of the responses. Due to this limitation, the average of the responses is slightly lower than the true average.

If any trend can be discerned from the responses to this question, it is that most participants - over 60% - would feel comfortable with a property tax increase of 5% or less. However, nearly 20% of

respondents reported being comfortable with a tax increase of 10% or greater. This suggests that there are two major groups of thought on the issue of tax increases.

For this question, the City Manager’s report identified some differences in the responses of certain demographic groups. For example, the lowest mean property tax increase was 4.14%, for respondents in the lowest income group. Respondents in the second-highest income bracket favoured the highest property tax increase - 5.45%. Renters supported a higher tax increase than owners. Also, those with University degrees tended to favour higher tax increases than those with a College diploma (City of Toronto, 2011).

**Figure 5: Maximum desired property tax increase**



*Chart created by author based on data from City of Toronto (2011).*

**Who should deliver services**

The 35 services were again categorised by the respondents, this time based on who should be responsible for delivering those services. The four categories were “The City should provide this service”, “The City should contract out this service”, “I don’t care as long as it costs the city less”, and “I don’t care as long as the quality is good”.

Those services that respondents deemed most necessary in the first question (Public transit, Fire Services, Water treatment and distribution, and EMS) were also strongly recommended to remain within

the City. 80%-90% of respondents thought that the City should continue providing these services, and less than 10% thought that they ought to be contracted out.

The services deemed least necessary (City-run live theatres, the Toronto Zoo, Exhibition Place, and Managing courts for provincial offenses) were met with significantly more indifference. Responses for these services were split more or less equally among all four categories, with the exception of “Managing courts for provincial offenses”, which had almost 40% support for being provided by the City.

### **Summary of public opinion**

In order to determine the effectiveness of this particular public consultation effort, it is necessary to determine the general will towards Toronto’s Core Services. While any attempt to distill the opinions of nearly 13,000 people will give a blurry picture of public opinion, there were many views that were held by a majority of respondents, regardless of demographic or geographic group. These include:

- Maintaining current levels of overall service, funded by a moderate increase in property taxes and/or user fees
- A maximum increase in property taxes between 4.14% and 5.45%
- Priority given to Public transit, Fire Services, Water treatment and distribution, and Emergency Medical Services (EMS)
- Looking into the possibility of contracting out the following services (less than 40% of respondents think the City should provide them)
  - Exhibition Place
  - Toronto Zoo
  - Business Improvement Areas
  - City-run live theatres
  - Toronto parking services
  - Managing courts for provincial offenses

## City priorities

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### **2012 operating budget**

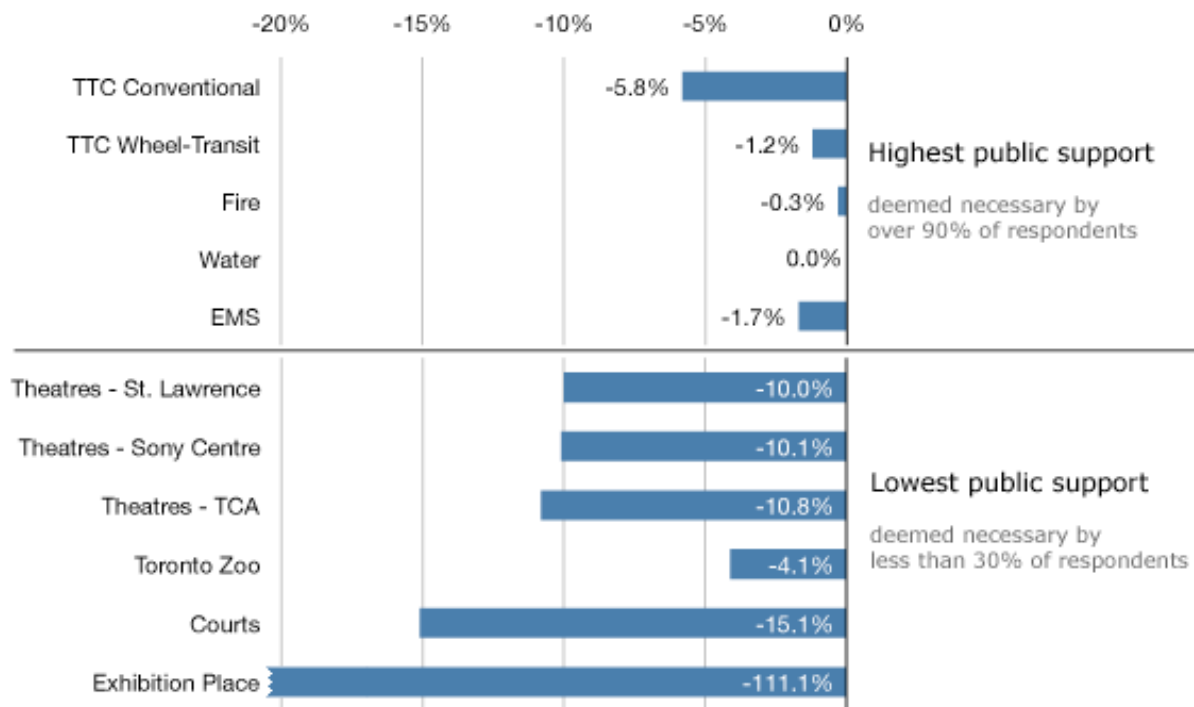
In order to weigh the City's priorities against those of the survey respondents, the program spending changes in the 2012 operating budget were analysed and compared to the list of priorities distilled from the survey responses. The results of this comparison can be found in Table 2.

Where public opinion was clear and about the necessity of services, the City of Toronto's 2012 budget tended to reflect that prioritisation. While none of the items listed below received an increase in their budgets, the degree of budget cuts were generally in line with the proportion of survey respondents that deemed the service necessary for the city.

One important exception to this trend is the transit budget. Public transit (operated by the TTC) consistently topped the list of virtually all respondents to the Service Review survey. Many respondents advocated for service increases, and implored the City to not make cuts to transit. The fact that conventional TTC services (i.e. Subways) were less of a priority in the City's budget than the Toronto Zoo marks a significant schism between public opinion and the City decisionmakers.



**Figure 6: Change in net expenditures, 2011-2012**



*Chart created by author based on data from City of Toronto (2012). See Appendix B for further details.*

### **Staff recommended new fees**

The survey results indicated a general public aversion to new user fees as a method for funding City services. That said, City staff introduced some recommendations for new user fees in the 2012 Budget. These include a nominal reproduction fee for Court Services, an administrative fee to update property tax accounts, a number of rental fees for new sports facilities, and a nominal online payment fee for Toronto Public Library.

As these fees do not have widespread impacts and are largely nominal, the new user fees recommended by City staff and adopted by Council generally respect the results of the survey.

### **Property tax increases**

City staff recommended a 2.5% increase in property taxes for residential properties, and lower increases for existing multi-residential properties, commercial and industrial properties. This amount falls well below the 4-5% that survey respondents indicated they would tolerate. Therefore, the property

tax increase measures adopted by Council in the 2012 Budget are in line with the public input received during the consultation period.

# Analysis

## Decision-making power

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Respondents to the Toronto Service Review survey were told that their feedback would be used to help Council “address Toronto’s 2012 budget gap”. It is important to note that the survey uses the relatively ambiguous word “feedback” to describe the purpose of the survey, rather than linking the responses to an explicit result or decision (City of Toronto, 2011).

While some priorities in the 2012 budget do correlate with the survey results, such as the low priority accorded to publicly-funded theatres, it is unclear whether the budget decisions were influenced by the public consultation process. On issues such as the rate of property tax increase, respondents’ preferences for higher tax increases were not reflected in the budget.

Also, the prioritisation of certain services over others in the operating budget - particularly the funding to the Toronto Zoo over some TTC transit services - does not line up with the opinions represented in the survey. Clearly, the Service Review consultation was not an exercise in citizen control.

In terms of Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation, the Service Review represents a level of tokenism somewhere between consultation and placation. The entrenched power relationships were not altered, but there was a degree of followthrough by using the survey to inform budget decisions.

## Dialogue

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Though the majority of respondents completed the survey online, the Service Review did not make use of web-based techniques for fostering deliberative discussions. The survey’s structure facilitated one-way feedback from individuals to the City of Toronto.

The Toronto Service Review sparked a wide-ranging discussion on various media platforms, including television, radio, social media, and blogs. However, the benefits of open discussion were not incorporated into the survey. The questions in the survey intended to capture respondents’ personal

opinions and priorities; the aim was not to have people question or defend their answers. Though outside the scope of this essay, the lack of dialogue in the consultation process may have had an effect on the quality and nature of the debate occurring in the wider public sphere. Would the discussion have been less polarising if respondents were encouraged to deliberate on the merits of other Torontonians' opinions at the formal consultation stage?

## Representation

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The survey respondents were found to be generally representative of Toronto's population as a whole. However, the representation is not perfect. The validity of the survey results could be questioned based on the demographic and geographic overrepresentation of some groups. For example, the age group 25-34 years old is overrepresented, as are those who own rather than rent their homes. Those who do not speak English or French are significantly underrepresented.

These disparities provide a possible justification for the budget's prioritisation of a different set of programs than what the survey results indicated. However, this argument rests on one of two assumptions: that elected officials and public administrators can ably discern how non-respondents would have answered the survey; or that they know what is best for the public, even if their decisions do not respect a sample of 1,200 residents.

Responses to the survey were overwhelmingly submitted online. Though a paper copy was available, less than 5% of respondents used it. This may explain, in part, why those demographic groups least likely to possess internet literacy skills (e.g. elderly and less educated residents) are underrepresented in the survey results.

## Education

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The survey respondents put a high level of importance on transparency and accountability in City government. The City has begun to meet these demands by releasing all the raw data from the consultation for the public to scrutinise and use. Budget information is also available on the City's

website, allowing individuals to analyse the source information, draw their own conclusions, and continue discussions outside of the traditional consultation process.

The survey itself also included an education component. Fact sheets were made available to explain each service, and respondents were invited to consult them in order to make an informed decision about what city services they value. This allowed for more meaningful participation, and increased the quality of the data received by City staff. The education component of the survey bolsters confidence that the results are able to genuinely reflect the opinions of the respondents.

## Public ratification

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The ultimate aim of participation is to include members of the public in the decision making process, and to avoid the top-down, expert-driven choices that have shaped our cities in the past. It is therefore extremely important that the public ratify the decisions that come out of a participation or consultation process.

The Service Review was not an exercise in citizen control, and therefore does not require formal ratification. It would be possible to gauge the level of public support through a public opinion survey, but no such survey was conducted in Toronto following the release of the budget. A high level of support in an opinion survey would indicate that residents are satisfied with the outcome of the consultation process, and would speak to the success of the participation process. It would also be possible to determine potential reasons why some residents did not participate in the survey.

This kind of post-implementation follow-up was not done after the Service Review was completed and the Budget released. Therefore, an authoritative source of information about public opinion does not, unfortunately, exist. However, the fact that public transit suffered significant budget cutbacks, while it was noted as a top priority for the majority of survey respondents, indicates a significant divide between City decision-makers and the public at large.

# Conclusions

The Toronto Service Review was conducted online, using a web-based feedback form. However, the structure of the consultation process was rooted in traditional, one-way communication methods. Respondents were permitted to share their opinions, but did not have an opportunity to engage with other respondents, ask questions, or receive clarification. Dialogue and debate about the Service Review was occurring online, but the survey was disconnected from it. In this way, the survey did not make the most of web-based tools.

The stated purpose of the survey was to give feedback, without any guarantee that respondents would have a direct impact on budget decisionmaking. The low degree of decision-making power has the potential to exacerbate cynicism, and may have discouraged respondents from completing the survey.

The educational component of the survey allowed respondents to access supporting information in order to formulate a more informed opinion. This is a positive aspect of the participation process that should continue to be provided in future consultation efforts.

While some population groups were overrepresented, the survey respondents were generally representative of the population of Toronto as a whole, based on 2006 Census information. The detailed demographic information collected with the survey proved to be a valuable resource for analysing representation and should be included in all public consultation. While it is not possible to attribute the generally high level of representation with the web-based nature of the survey, these results suggest that online consultation has the potential to reach a broad range of demographic groups.

There was no formal public ratification of the 2012 budget, which was ostensibly informed by the Service Review. It is therefore difficult to gauge the degree of support for the outcomes of the Service Review participation process. A lack of follow-up in this regard makes it difficult to predict how future consultation efforts in Toronto will be impacted by the experience of respondents to the Service Review survey.

## Recommendations

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The Service Review failed to take advantage of the rich online discussion taking place on social media and blogs. Integration of the feedback survey with the conversations Torontonians were already having online could have been used to foster dialogue and education in the participation process. There are many online engagement techniques that should be explored in this regard, such as “Twitter town halls” or real-time collaborative editing of policy documents.

Promoting alternate modes of consultation in conjunction with online methods may be useful in bridging the gap of demographic representation. The Service Review did take an active approach in soliciting feedback at various events and locations, however, the demographic representation may be improved by a more multi-pronged approach.

Following the decision-making stage of a public participation project, public opinion polls should be conducted to gauge the level of support for the decisions that were made. A high level of support would indicate that the participation process was successful.

Public consultation efforts ought to continue collecting rich demographic information about respondents, so as to evaluate the degree of representation achieved and to provide insight for how to engage all members of a community in public participation.

## Questions for further research

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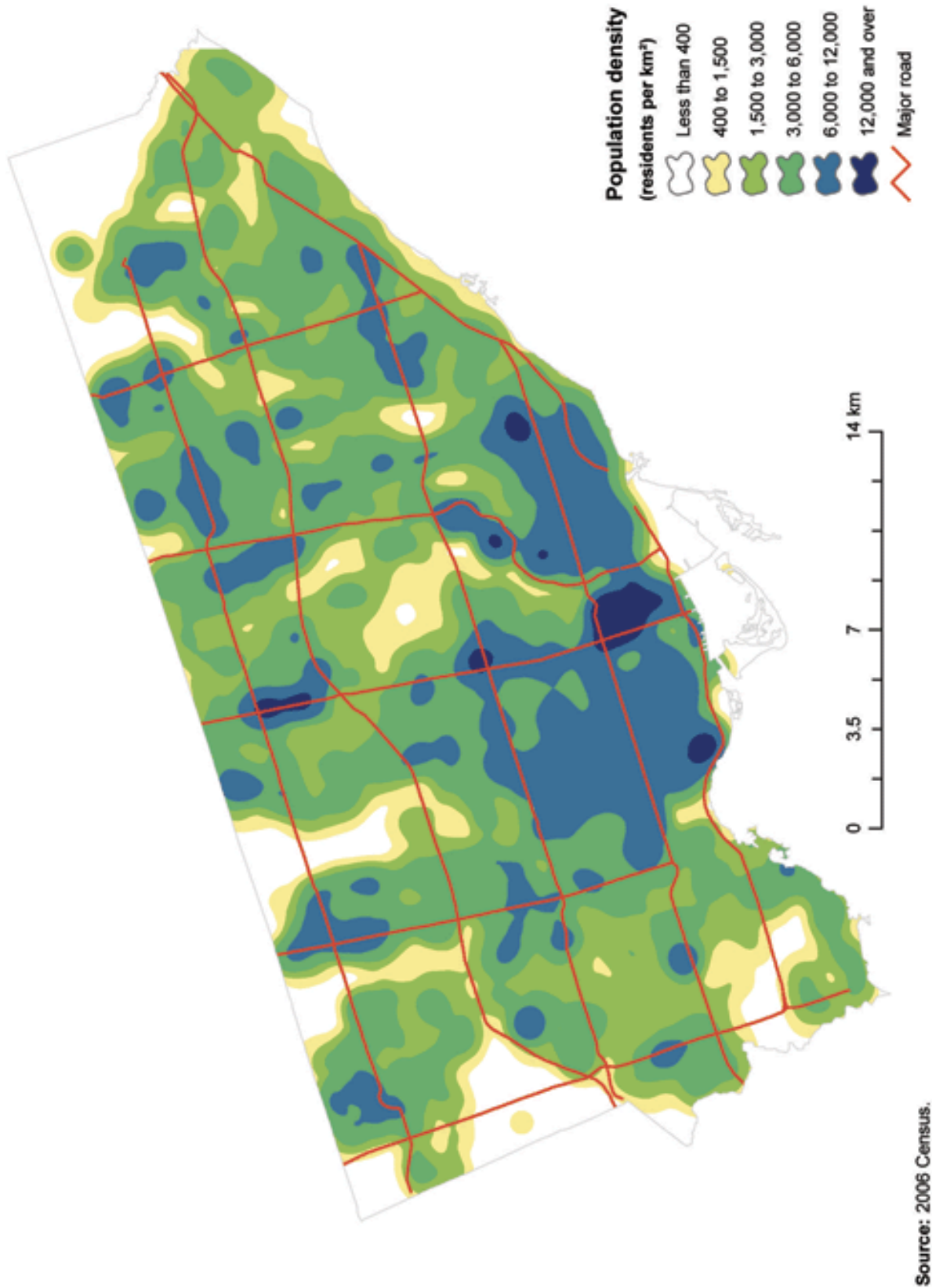
The following questions are raised by the conclusions of this essay, and may contribute to further progress in the study of web-based public participation:

- To what extent does the deliberative quality of official participation processes affect the quality and nature of discussions in the general public sphere, both online and off?
- Does web-based consultation provide a more representative sample of respondents than traditional consultation methods?

- How can governments use decentralised online tools (such as wikis) to enhance participative planning?

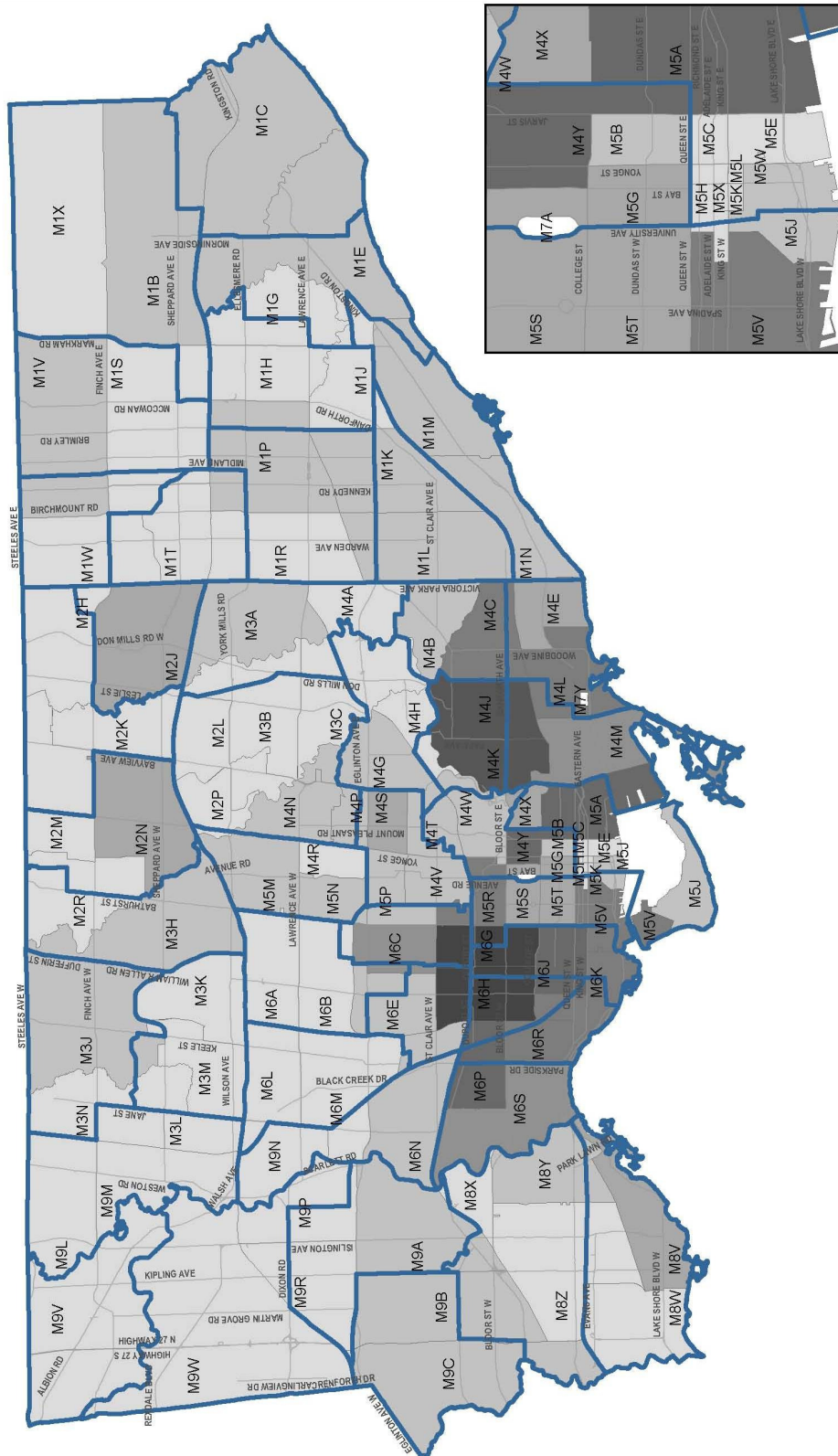


Map 1 - Population density in the City of Toronto



Source: Statistics Canada, 2006 Census, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/85-561-m/2009018/m001-eng.htm>

**Core Service Review Public Consultation - Number of Participants by Postal Code**

**Toronto**

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Published: July 2011  
Prepared by: Social Policy Analysis & Research  
Contact: [spar@toronto.ca](mailto:spar@toronto.ca)

### Legend

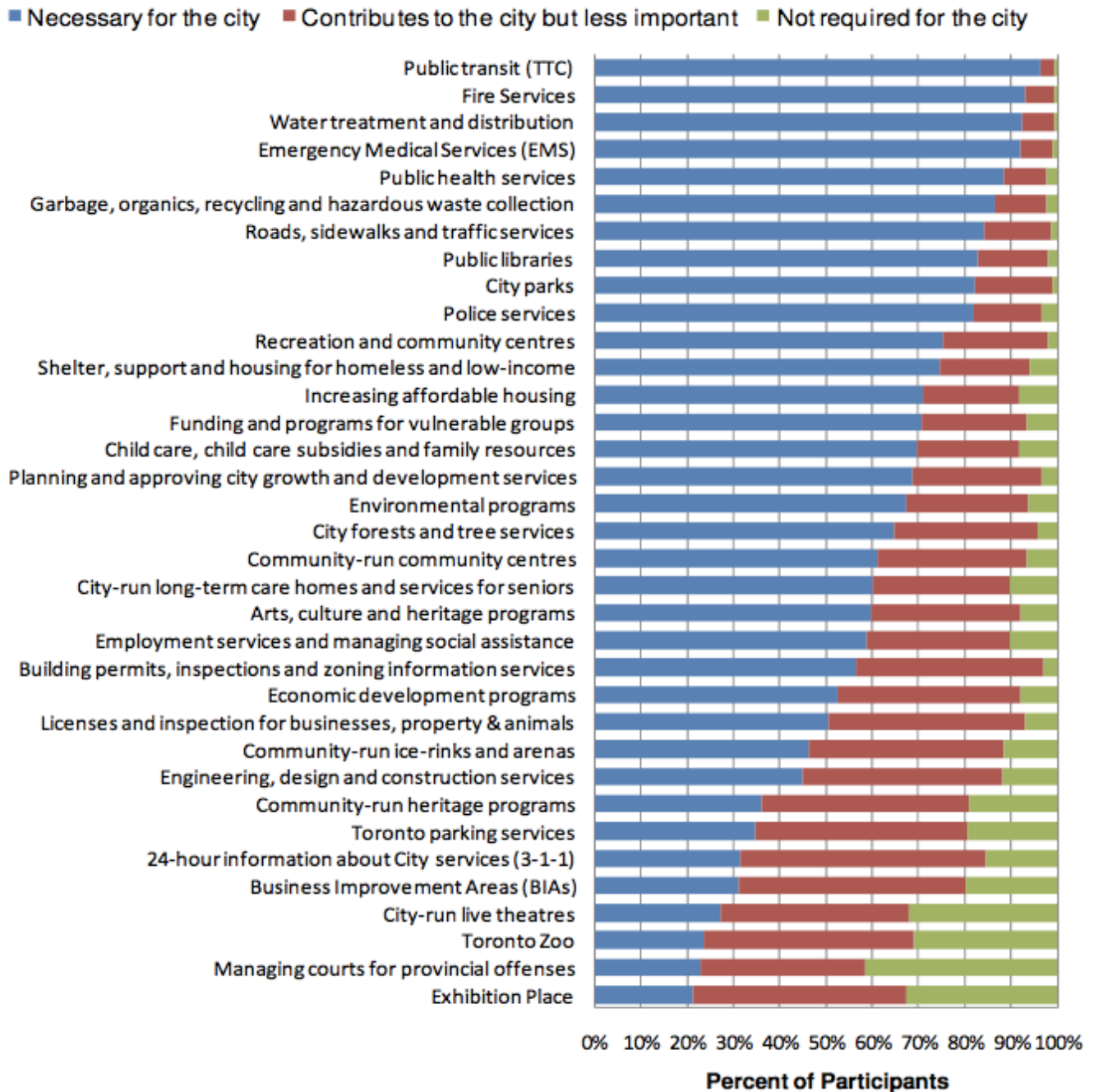
### Number of Participants by Postal Code



**Source: City of Toronto (2011), p. 17**

## Appendix A

### Priorities for 35 Service Areas



Source: City of Toronto (2012).

## Appendix B: Detailed Budget Expenditures

Program	2011 Budgeted Net Expenditures	2012 Budgeted Net Expenditures	Percent Change in Net Expenditures	Survey ranking out of 35 (lower numbers are deemed more necessary)
Water <sup>1</sup>	\$0	\$0	0.0%	3
Fire	\$355,823,900	\$354,624,300	-0.3%	2
TTC Wheel-Transit	\$91,011,500	\$89,882,100	-1.2%	1
EMS	\$66,151,500	\$65,030,000	-1.7%	4
Toronto Zoo	\$11,577,500	\$11,108,100	-4.1%	33
TTC Conventional	\$429,110,700	\$404,101,000	-5.8%	1
Theatres - St. Lawrence	\$1,346,200	\$1,211,600	-10.0%	32
Theatres - Sony Centre	\$1,031,200	\$927,300	-10.1%	32
Theatres - TCA	\$923,700	\$823,600	-10.8%	32
Courts	-\$12,136,600	-\$13,966,900	-15.1%	34
Exhibition Place <sup>2</sup>	\$46,700	-\$5,200	-111.1%	35

*Chart created by author based on data from City of Toronto (2012).*

<sup>1</sup> Water services' net expenditures are \$0 because it recoups all of its costs from user fees and subsidies.

<sup>2</sup> Exhibition Place has a decrease in Net Expenditures over 100% because it is budgeted to run a deficit in 2012, whereas it posted a profit in 2011.

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