

Structures & Practices  
Supporting Active Citizenship  
In  
Local Government

Jenny Slade Scholarship 2001



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## **Introduction**

As recipient of the Jenny Slade Scholarship for 2001, I traveled to the north west of the United States and to Vancouver, Canada in May/June 2001.

To gather information, I met and spoke with Council staff and elected officials. I visited offices, libraries, community centres and Council meetings. I read policy statements, reports and media releases and visited workshops for residents. I also spoke informally with residents whenever the opportunity presented itself. It isn't possible to fully investigate and cover every aspect of the complexities of participatory democracy in a short time especially while keeping to a word limit that busy community services staff may find time to read. This is also one reason why the underlying assumption of the value of inclusive participatory practices and structures is not questioned or examined.

I have attempted to highlight significant programs, projects and approaches while also placing them in their local context. The product is at best a glimpse or snapshot at a particular place and space in time.

## **Context**

"We should consider everything in the context of everything else". The ways in which different cities have developed processes and structures to address any of their goals shouldn't be considered without an acknowledgement of the part that the political, social, economic, historical and technological contexts of each individual situation plays. Cities are as individual as people, a product of all the above contexts in which they operate and have developed from. The issues they confront vary as much as the resources they have available to address them and while some of those issues are shared, as are some of the responses, there are no panaceas, no "one size fits all" solutions. The cities visited, like many Australian cities, have taken responsibility for the hard work of creating solutions tailored to their unique context and needs; to assess situations, set their focus, think through options, (which will often include strategies working well for other cities), develop plans, take action, modify strategies, learn and go forward, (Shapiro, Sydney, 1995).

## **Key Differences**

One of the key differences between Australian local government and local government in the USA is that voting in Council elections is not compulsory. In terms of participatory structures and potential for active citizenship this is an important point to note. At the broadest democratic level we have a more participatory framework, albeit mandatory, to work within. Voter turnouts varying from 30 to 70% of eligible voters are not uncommon in United States local elections and many politicians and their campaign teams work hard to encourage people to take advantage of their right to vote.

Responsibilities vary between Australian local government and our US counterparts. Police, law and justice, fire and education consume a significant portion of local budgets as they are primarily local responsibilities unlike Australian cities where these services fall under state control.

Forms of local government also vary more within the US and are quite different from those in Australia. These include Council Manager, Mayor-Council and Commissioner structures.

- The **Council Manager** form is similar to the way in which most Australian Councils operate, with the council as the governing body of the city, elected by the public, and the manager is hired by council to carry out the policies it establishes. The council provides legislative direction while the manager is responsible for the day to day administrative operation of the city based on the council's recommendations. The manager also serves as council's chief advisor and is responsible for preparing the budget, directing day to day operations and hiring and firing personnel. Typically the mayor is recognised as the political head of the municipality, but is a member of the legislative body and does not have the power to veto legislative actions.
- The **Mayor-Council** most closely parallels the United States federal government, with an elected legislature and a separately elected executive. The mayor is designated as the head of the city or county government. The extent of his or her authority can range from purely ceremonial functions to full scale responsibility for day to day operations. But the mayor's or elected executive's duties generally include the following: hiring and firing department heads, preparation and administration of the budget.
- The **commission** form of government is characterised by an elected governing board that holds both legislative and executive powers. The board is usually comprised of three to five members, although this number varies. The board has responsibility for adopting the budget, passing resolutions and enacting ordinances and regulations. A number of other officials are also popularly elected and serve as heads of major departments, (International City/County Management Association, 1998. Doc 114238).

Seattle City is best described as fitting the Mayor-Council model, Shoreline City and Vancouver City are Council Manager cities and Portland City operates under the Commissioner form.

### **Vital Statistics**

The capacity to offer services, facilities and provide structures is often linked to the size and population of a city. Larger cities have economies of scale and greater access to income from which they derive their capital and operational budgets. While their budgets may be larger they also have to provide services and facilities for their larger populations and, from a citizen involvement perspective, develop structures and implement practices

which provide opportunities for residents to participate in decisions at the local level as opposed to a city wide level. Australian writer Michael Jones, commenting on the increasing size of local government in Australia, “ Many feel that the expansion in size is an advantage but the dramatic change in scale reduces participation. The cost of this enlargement is almost never mentioned in debate”, (Jones,1989:153). Jones, grappling with the concept of a “human scale of government”, suggests that meaningful participation becomes problematic with large groups and refers to research that indicates direct public participation becomes difficult with populations above 8000,(ibid.). “It is difficult to understand how larger local authorities can develop meaningful local participation. One percent of even 20,000 is 200 people, and even this small degree of intense participation would create havoc in many local authorities. Larger percentages of participation create unmanageable situations even in smaller local units”, (ibid.). The strong “neighbourhood” focus evident in the cities visited may well have roots in this concept and could be viewed as an attempt to maintain participatory opportunities for very large populations.

### **Seattle**

Located 182km south of the US Canadian border, the City of Seattle is in the state of Washington on Puget Sound. It covers an area of 217sq km and was founded in 1869. In 1999, the city population was 540 500. The city budget for fiscal year 2000 was \$2,090,201,619. The Mayor and a nine-member council are elected at large for four year terms. Seattle has the highest rate of residents who have completed university degrees and high school among major US cities. Seattle has received recognition for its quality of life, including “ Best City in the West” (Money, 1998) and “Best for Work and Family” (Fortune, 1996), (City of Seattle, 2000/2001). More recently it was also voted as the worst US city for traffic congestion and having had the misfortune of travelling both Interstate 5 and Highway 99 in peak hour I can understand why, “so much water, so few land bridges” is how one local explained the problem.

### **Shoreline**

To the north of Seattle the new City of Shoreline was incorporated in 1995. Shoreline covers an area of 11.5 sq miles and has a population of 52 240 residents. The city’s annual operating budget is approximately \$30 million. Newer and smaller than nearby Seattle, city documentation cites the incorporation of the city as, “realising the vision of citizens who wanted a greater voice in governing their part of the Puget Sound region”, (Shoreline City Owner’s Manual). The seven member part time council is elected at large.

### **Portland**

In Oregon state, Portland City covers an area of 146 sq.miles and serves a population of 500,000. Incorporated in 1851, the city’s current annual budget is \$1,431,997,183. Served by a Mayor and 5 full time commissioners, Portland is a very pretty city with tree lined streets and an abundance of public art.

### **Vancouver**

Located in British Columbia, Canada, Vancouver City covers an area of 113.1 sq. km and has a population of 543 871. It is the second largest city in Canada. Its operating budget is \$554,382,535. Vancouver has been described as the “world’s most livable city” and residents are quick to point out the abundance of natural wonders which surround the city in which you can swim at the beach in the morning and snow ski in the mountains in the afternoon.

### **Active Citizenship in Seattle**

Many of the structures now in place have their roots in Seattle’s Comprehensive Plan developed in response to Washington State’s *1990 Growth Management Act*. This Act requires the county to establish an urban growth boundary beyond which significant residential development will not be permitted. In order to lessen potential political pressure to break this boundary, while still creating additional homes required to absorb the forecasted population growth, the goal of the city is to create, “neighbourhoods that are so healthy and attractive that people will want to live in them and not seek to settle beyond the boundary. In order to do this, Seattle’s plan, entitled *Towards a Sustainable Seattle*, laid out a strategy that defines a set of “urban villages” and “urban centres” within the City. These areas have the density necessary to support good access to mass transit and zoning that will permit targeted amounts of additional housing and jobs.

The City then asked the people of each of these areas to create neighbourhood plans to provide for the anticipated growth as well as community improvements to ensure that these neighbourhood centres are healthy and pleasant places to live”, (Conlin, Seattle, 2000). Fostering these communities is a key element in the City’s sustainability strategy. Sustainable Seattle, a non profit organisation that promotes education and action around sustainability, defines sustainability as “long term cultural, economic, environmental and social, health and vitality” (ibid.). Seattle’s neighbourhood planning process encourages communities that combine affordable housing, diversified transport systems, business and residential centres within walking distances and healthy environments.

According to Conlin, the neighbourhood planning process also reflects another key element of sustainability, the participation of the population in civil society and civic life. “Recognising that in a democratic society citizens are responsible for making the key choices that determine the direction of the society, Seattle sought to increase the positive engagement of citizens by developing a citizen based model for neighbourhood planning. Over 20,000 citizens were part of the process of developing neighbourhood plans and a restructure of Council to orient the culture to become responsive and responsible to neighbourhoods and communities followed. The long range goal is to build a positive relationship between citizens and their government. Engaged citizens are active in decision making and activities outside of government that foster community spirit and strengthen community ties,” (Conlin.op.cit).

In 1990, the Department of Neighbourhoods was created bringing together six different city sections. The department’s mandate is to “ preserve and enhance Seattle’s diverse neighbourhoods; empower people to make positive contributions in their communities;

bring government closer to all people, ensuring that it is responsive”, (Diers, Seattle, 2000).

The foundation of the department’s work is the thirteen (13) “little city halls”, storefront offices throughout Seattle. At a neighbourhood centre residents can pay bills, gain access to a range of information and referral to a variety of human services and assistance. Each centre is staffed by a coordinator who is the link between the community and downtown. “The coordinators know city government, so they can help citizens and their organisations access the programs and services they need. Likewise the coordinators the communities so they can assist city departments and officials in working with them effectively. The coordinators have no other agenda other than helping people meet their needs. As a result, they are trusted by people with divergent interests and help them find common ground. It is this community building role that is perhaps their greatest contribution” (Jim Diers, Director, Dept. of Neighbourhoods Seattle City).

The department has a number of other resources to help build a stronger sense of community including a program of leadership and organisational development, a network of fifty nine (59) community gardens (known as P Patch), and Involving All Neighbours, a program to integrate people with developmental disabilities into the life of communities where they reside. No program, though has been more successful at community building than the Neighbourhood Matching Fund. “The Neighbourhood Matching Fund supports community self help projects. Neighbourhood organisations apply for cash from the City as an equal match to their contribution of cash, volunteer labour, or donated goods and services,” (ibid.).

The program has been used to:

- build new playgrounds
- create new parks
- reforest open space
- plant street trees
- develop community gardens
- restore streams and wetlands
- create public art
- renovate facilities
- build traffic roundabouts
- pilot school community programs
- document community histories
- develop neighbourhood plans and much more.

Over 1800 projects have been completed during the program’s history. Since 1998 the available funds have tripled and the program now has an annual budget of \$ 4.5million.

Another successful outcome of the program has been its ability to involve people in their community. Catering especially to the “meeting averse” the fund provides an opportunity to make a short term focussed commitment to a particular project and in the process participants develop relationships, get involved in other projects and make community

linkages. “The matching fund is a wonderful tool for building the capacity of existing organisations and developing new ones”, (ibid.).

Seattle City Council member Richard Conlin points out that some questions and issues still remain unanswered, however, or require further work. Ensuring that plans and neighbourhood planning is truly representative and engaging underrepresented groups, the need for the city to remain a credible partner by continuing to move forward with neighbourhood plan implementation and the ongoing need for cultural change within a bureaucratic structure all require careful acknowledgement to ensure continued success and inclusiveness. The need for the development of formal sustainability assessment tools and the allocation of resources for this purpose is ongoing also, however, the newly created Office for Sustainability and Environmental Management is currently working to develop indicators and coordinate the city’s efforts. The fact that City stakeholders, well positioned to continue positive change, are recognising these issues bodes well for the city’s continued success.

### **Active Citizenship in the City of Shoreline**

Residents of Shoreline City have several opportunities to help determine the direction the city government takes; by electing City council members; attending Council meetings and public hearings; serving on advisory groups; and participating in organised neighbourhood associations, (Shoreline City,1999). The City has produced an “Owners Manual” similar to a car owner’s manual which outlines in simple, clear language a complete guide to the City of Shoreline. The manual resulted from the Citizens Involvement and Communication Project Committee created to help the City better communicate and involve residents in their City government. The actual formal workings of the City are readily accessible with agendas for open Council Meetings posted at libraries and police neighbourhood centres as well as available on the city website, and on a special agenda telephone line number. Council meetings are also televised on Chambers Cable Channel 32 twice weekly. Another channel, devoted to the City of Shoreline, replays Council Meetings for 24hours. Public comment is encouraged and provided for, at all Council Meetings. There are public comment periods at the beginning and end of the meetings, and after the staff report for workshop and action items. Public comment is limited to two minutes per person at the beginning and during the meeting and five minutes at the end.

Citizen input is also encouraged through Advisory Groups. These include the Planning Commission, Library Board, and Parks Recreation and Cultural Services Advisory Committee, which are Standing Committees where members sit for set terms. Other groups are established to assist with a particular task and disbanded when their goal has been met. The City has established Community Police Storefronts as an aid to community safety and has developed Neighbourhood Appreciation Day celebrating and appreciating good neighbours.

The City of Shoreline has fourteen (14) Neighbourhood Associations and the Council of Neighbourhoods is made of up of two representatives from each association. “The

Council of Neighbourhoods was created in recognition of the importance of citizen participation and two way communication”,(ibid). The Office of Neighbourhoods is Shoreline’s main liaison between the City and neighbourhood associations and administers the Neighbourhood Mini Grants Program. This program provides up to \$5000 annually for neighbourhoods who are required to match funding either in cash or kind.

Mini grant categories include:

- neighbourhood improvement
- neighbourhood planning
- public school partnerships, and
- neighbourhood organising.

Some completed projects include:

- the reintroduction of Pacific Tree Frogs into Paramount Park
- banners and hanging planters in North City
- painting of the Richmond Beach Recreation Centre
- tree planting
- playground equipment installation and
- murals.

As with Seattle City’s Neighbourhood Funding Program, the outcomes include those of community capacity building that result from the relationships formed and the process of neighbourhood involvement as well as the more tangible outcomes of the projects themselves, however, no formal indicators have been established in relation to this side of the projects.

### **Active Citizenship in Portland**

Resolution adopted by the City Council of Portland, Oregon on February 7, 1996 is as follows, “As elected officials and staff of the City of Portland, we believe that effective citizen involvement is essential to good governance. We recognise that elected officials, staff and citizens all play important roles in governing the city. We believe that collaboration between the City and citizens will result in the best decisions for all of Portland. To this end, the City of Portland commits to promote and sustain an environment that creates and responds to citizen involvement.

We hold that the success of citizen involvement depends on: mutual respect of all parties; informed and involved citizens; City officials and staff who recognise their role in facilitating and responding to citizen input.

To carry out our commitment, we adopt these guiding principles of citizen involvement:

- \* Value civic involvement as essential to the health of the city
- \* Promote on-going dialogue with citizens by maintaining relationships with neighbourhood and community groups
- \* Respect and encourage citizen participation by ensuring that city communications and processes are understandable

- \* Reach out to all our communities to encourage participation which reflects Portland's rich diversity
- \* Think creatively and plan wisely, using citizen involvement processes and techniques to best fit the goals of the particular project
- \* Seek early involvement of citizens in planning, projects and policy development
- \* Consider and respond to citizen input in a timely manner, respecting all perspectives and insights
- \* Commit to coordinate City bureaus' outreach and involvement activities to make the best use of citizens' time and efforts
- \* Evaluate and report on the effectiveness of City outreach efforts to achieve the quality of City/citizen collaboration critical to good governance
- \* Promote on-going education of citizens in neighbourhood and community groups, and city officials and staff in community organising, networking and collaboration
- \* Provide financial and technical support to Portland's neighbourhood association network as the primary channel for citizen input and involvement."

Portland has an Office of Neighbourhood Involvement(ONI), operating under the Commissioner for Neighbourhood Involvement, Dan Saltzman. ONI was established in 1974. It has established seven centres for Neighbourhood Involvement providing city wide services to Portland neighbourhoods. These include; financial support, leadership and diversity training, strategic planning retreats for boards and community organising services. ONI has a network of relationships between the seven neighbourhood district coalition offices, ninety five (95) Neighbourhood Associations, business associations, other community groups and citizens. Eighty six (86) neighbourhoods, divided into seven (7) neighbourhood coalitions share \$1.5 million annually, in available funding from the City. Formal evaluative structures exist as part of the guidelines that must be adhered to for a group to be considered a neighbourhood association and be eligible for funding.

### **Active Citizenship in Vancouver City**

Vancouver City has recently completed a three year independent review of Public Involvement. Recommendations from this review include outreach strategies that will assist to make city processes more accessible for the 30% of residents for whom English is a second language and the preparation of the Newcomer's Guide to Vancouver City. As a result of the first phase of the review 10 processes were selected to investigate potential opportunities for increased participation and to evaluate existing processes.

As part of Vancouver's Better City Government Project the review provided the following recommendations:

1. To develop a set of guiding principles
2. Develop a policy on Multicultural Outreach and the translation of information materials
3. Train staff in plain language
4. Increase staff training for public involvement
5. Develop and use a public involvement planning forum checklist
6. Establish a core of expertise in participatory processes

7. Commitment to evaluate each process
8. Prepare and maintain a community contact data base
9. Continuity of contact and public involvement
10. Continuity of staff involved in specific neighbourhoods
11. Training in public conduct for staff and officials
12. Training course in civics be developed and implemented
13. Provision of background materials ( eg fact sheets)
14. Broader use of media in public involvement
15. Improved use of survey research
16. Enhanced feedback and closure ,(Context Research, Vancouver, 1998).

This comprehensive review used a variety of processes to develop the recommendations and the City is in the process of working towards implementation of some of the recommendations. The vigorous review demonstrates the City's commitment to ensuring valid and inclusive participatory processes. Vancouver City has a strong tradition of Social Planning celebrating the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of its Social Planning Department in 1998. Traditionally this department has championed the principles of inclusion and commitment to processes that encourage active citizenship.

### **Conclusion**

Each of the four (4) cities visited has a commitment to active citizenship. Each has adopted strategies, practices and structures which encourage and enhance the potential for citizens to take an active role in decisions that effect their daily lives. They face similar challenges in terms of ensuring that processes are representative of all residents. Many, though not all, of the processes developed and used favour particular sections of communities and identifying and implementing truly representative structures that engage underrepresented groups remains an ongoing challenge. Developing and maintaining city structures that are flexible and responsive to changing community need also requires ongoing effort. The cities also share the need to continue to develop effective evaluative tools that can be used to assist to validate the processes they champion. Without effective evaluative tools the real effectiveness or otherwise of the effort and resources allocated to the strategies described remains somewhat ambiguous. These challenges are also present for Australian cities.

While there are some similarities in approaches each of the cities have developed their own responses to the needs of their individual communities. Therein, lies the true value of the "local" in local government.

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