



Assessing Community Engagement Strategies in The Development of Brandon City Plan

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Credit: Sandy Black

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1.0 Introduction

Most cities strive to maximize their resources, improve their local economies, and attain sustainable development by having a city plan – a long term strategy to accommodate growth and change (Rasoolimanesh et al., 2012). As cities evolve and grow, the importance of integrating diverse perspectives and engaging stakeholders in decision-making processes becomes increasingly evident. The integration of diverse perspectives in planning is called collaborative or inclusionary planning, where every stakeholder is represented and has a voice in leading to the plan's formation (Purbani, 2017). Brandon, Manitoba's

second largest city, has just completed a draft of their first ever city plan that will guide growth and change over the next 30 years (City of Brandon, 2024). The city recently completed the last engagement session and is beginning the adoption process of the plan, this presents an opportunity for reflection and analysis of selected engagement strategies and their effectiveness.

This study seeks to examine the various approaches of community engagement selected in the development of the Brandon City Plan. This research examines the challenges, successes, and lessons learned from the community engagement processes and strategies, and identifies opportunities for improving future community engagement practices in urban planning processes.



Figure 1: Funfair Activities in the City of Brandon
Source: Brandon City Plan, 2024



Figure 2: A Street View in the City of Brandon
Source: Brandon City Plan, 2024

2.0 Background

The city of Brandon, situated in southwestern Manitoba, Canada, has witnessed significant growth and transformation in recent years, (see Figure 1 and 2), from a small settlement and hunting ground to a community of over 51,000. The city of Brandon does not just serve the 51,000 population, but it provides services to over 190,000 people living in Southwestern Manitoba (City of Brandon, 2024), like Souris, Rapid City, Brookdale, Douglas, Shilo, Kemnay, Carroll, etc. The Brandon City Plan becomes necessary to guide future growth, address community needs, and enhance overall livability not only for the city but for the surrounding area as well.

At the heart of every planning process is the need to engage the community. However, as was seen in the Brandon City Plan process, juggling effective community engagement and the planners responsibility to consider the “common good” is a difficult task.

Considering how large and diverse the City of Brandon has become over time, ranging from residents and community groups to private sector entities, getting the interest and views of the vast community on the type of city they imagine into the development plan can be daunting. Especially for a City like Brandon that has small numbers of Planners and those planners also have to carry out their day to day office activities and a limited budget to work with.

However, this is necessary to understand the various interests of the public and synthesize that with planning best practice to propose an outcome that considers the good of the city as a whole.

To that end, the study seeks to explore the outcomes of community engagement efforts in shaping the content, priorities, and implementation strategies of the Brandon City Plan. By analyzing stakeholder perspectives on the community engagement process’s inclusivity, responsiveness, and effectiveness, this research aims to provide valuable insights and recommendations for enhancing future urban planning endeavours in Brandon and beyond.

3.0 Facts of the Case

At the beginning of the project, the City administration formulated a project timeline intended to provide a structured framework for guiding the vision from inception to completion. The project was divided into three distinct phases: the preliminary phase focused on gathering input and insights from stakeholders, the subsequent phase entailed validating the envisioned goals, and finally, the drafting phase involved synthesizing the accumulated data into a cohesive plan (see Figure 3) (City of Brandon, 2022b). Commencing in February 2022, the City diligently progressed through each phase, and the City completed the first draft in

March 2024 (City of Brandon, 2022a). Throughout these phases, the City recognized the importance of actively involving the public in decision-making. A closer look at each phase reveals the degree of public engagement and the methodologies employed to ensure widespread participation in the project.

3.1 Phase 1: Listening and Learning

The community engagement for the Brandon City Plan started in February 2022 with an initial public engagement. The goal of the engagement was to reach out to the community and, more so, the overlooked groups such as older people, Indigenous Peoples, youth, immigrants, and students. The City adopted several methods to reach as many as possible in the community, and some of the methods include:

- City-wide mail-out
- Billboard advertising
- Social media advertising
- One-on-one meetings
- City Plan Survey
- Community Group Meeting
- Providing an email and phone number for feedback
- Designated website
- Radio interviews
- Video project updates (City of Brandon, 2022a)

By using all of the methods above, the City got responses from the community, which are captured in Figure 4. The City got more than 800 responses through the survey, and



Figure 3: Brandon City Plan Project Timeline

more of the responses came from women. The highest percentage of responses in the age range was between 31 and 40, and many people showed up at the one-on-one and community group meetings (City of Brandon, 2022a), as shown in Figures 5 to 7. Also, attendance and feedback came from a wide range of community members across the city, which is depicted by the heat map in Figure 8. The community engagement centred around housing, environment, transportation, community services and businesses.

However, the major concerns of the community members during the engagement were housing, transportation, substance abuse and public safety (City of Brandon, 2022a).

3.2 Phase 2: Confirming the Vision

The second stage of the community engagement was about validating the information collected during phase 1 with the stakeholders in the community. The stage involved more workshops and connecting with other community members unavailable during phase 1 of the engagement, and for those who could not make it to the workshop of phase 2 and the phase 1 of the



Figure 4: Methods of Getting the Community Engaged. Source: Brandon City Plan Engagement Report, 2024.

engagement, and for those who could not make it to the workshop of phase 2 and the phase 1 engagement, they made it available to the community members through the Brandon City on-line platform. Phase 2 was an in-depth discussion of issues and topics the community and stakeholders raised in phase 1 (see Figure 9).



Figure 5: Community Engagement with Stakeholders
Source: Brandon City Plan, 2024



Figure 7: Community Engagement
Source: Brandon City Plan, 2024



Figure 6: One-One Engagement in Brandon Downtown
Source: Brandon City Plan, 2024

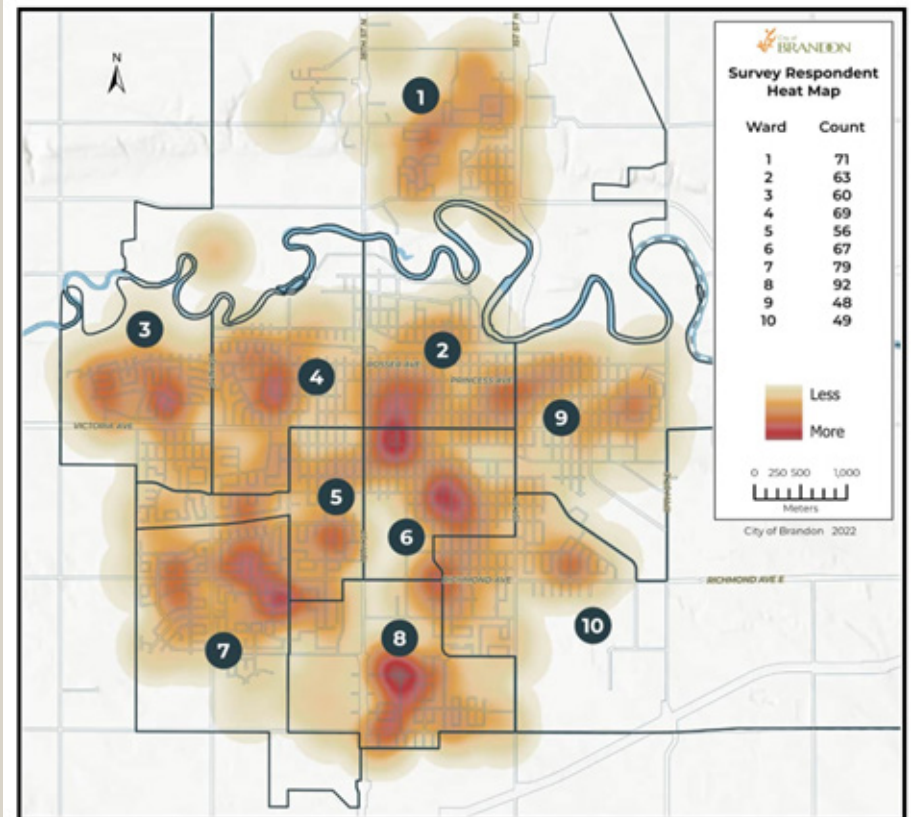


Figure 8: Heat Map of Survey Respondents across the City
Source: Brandon City Plan Engagement Report, 2024

This stage is critical because it is a time of reconciling issues, agreeing on discussed topics, and verifying if the City rightly captured all the feedback from the community in phase 1 (City of Brandon, 2024).

3.3 Phase 3: Drafting the Plan

Phase 3 was the last stage of the Brandon development plan, where the City did the compilation, sorting and analysis of the feedback from the community meetings and other methods used were also drafted into the City Plan. The City had many internal meetings with various departments for several months before finally arriving at the draft for the Brandon development plan.

3.4 Challenges Encountered During the Brandon Development Plan Community Engagement

Community engagement, in theory, offers an ideal vision of democracy where every voice is heard and every opinion is valued. However, in practice, it is a complex one, as observed in the process of the Brandon City Plan. Some of the challenges were:

Time Constraint: Every project has a timeline, and in the case of the Brandon City Plan, it was envisaged as a 1-year plan but has spanned over 2 years due to various factors such as staffing, funding, engagement timing and the emergence of a verbally aggressive group that hijacked the community engagement accusing the city of 15 minute city propaganda, forcing



Figure 9: Stakeholders Engagement Session
Source: Brandon City Plan Engagement Report, 2024

the city administrators to pause all engagement efforts momentarily due to safety and lack of effective engagement.

4.0 Outcomes

To better understand how effective the strategies were, it is essential to evaluate what was asked by the city from the community, what the city heard in community engagements, and what was finally envisioned and drafted in the Development Plan. Table 1 provides a summary of what the city asked the community, what the city perceived as the residents’ desire and what was assimilated into the city plan. Table 1 shows that the City wanted the people to determine how their city would look like or the kind of city the residents imagined, and through a meticulous process of community engagement, they were able to achieve it. The city plan incorporated most of the goals and desires of the residents in terms of policies drafted to address the community’s concerns. For example, the residents desire the city to provide an enabling environment for inclusive housing options, and the city has implemented policies to make that happen. Figure 7 summarises all the housing options the city looks forward to making available to the residents through the drafted policies.

5.0 Lessons Learned

The process of developing the Brandon City Plan was supported by a comprehensive engagement of the community, and this shows how the City authority relates with stakeholders. From an analysis that reflects

Table 1: Summary of Community Engagement and Policy Vision

S/N	What was asked from the Community	What was heard by the City	What was Drafted into the Brandon City Plan
1	What kind of city do you want Brandon to be in in the next 20 years?	Healthy city, a growing city and a moving city	To achieve the vision, the city created policies focused on improving the city’s environmental, social, and economic conditions. See pages 18 -19
2	What is the pull factor for living in Brandon?	Size of the city, the commute, accessibility to community services, and the green spaces.	The City made policies to protect Brandon’s natural environment and ensure spaces are accessible and inclusive for all. See page 24 & 22.
3	What are your concerns about living in Brandon?	Housing, substance abuse, and public safety,	The City created policies to address all the major concerns in the city. See pages 18 – 52.
4	What kind of inclusive housing effort would you like to see?	More housing for Seniors, mixed development, and transit-oriented development	The City made policies that provided various affordable housing for all residents. See page 19.
5	What kind of change in transportation would you like to see?	More bike lanes, better lighting on paths, and less reliance on cars.	The City created policies relating to innovative and evolving modes of transportation.
6	What kind of efforts towards Net Zero would you like to see in your city?	More trees, alternative heating methods, accommodation of electric cars and buses	The City intend to adopt a net zero strategy by encouraging electric vehicle charging and parking infrastructure.

* This table is a listing excerpts of what the city heard and not an exhaustive list of feedback.



Figure 10 : The Housing Continuum
Source:Brandon City Plan, 2024

on different stakeholders' views and what was finally drafted, I have learned several lessons that have shaped my understanding and will improve my approach to future community engagement in my planning career.

5.1 Importance of Inclusive Engagement:

What stood out in the Brandon City plan was that the role inclusivity plays in community engagements is crucial because it became clear that successful planning outcomes require diverse participation from across the community spectrum. This includes residents, businesses, women and young adults who are marginalized within society. Hence, it is essential for planning processes to be intentionally structured to minimize barriers to entry while ensuring voices from all segments of society are heard and respected.

5.2 Flexibility in Engagement Approaches:

The development of the Brandon City Plan demonstrated that a one-size-fits-all approach to community engagement is less effective. Different stakeholder groups have varying preferences for receiving information and providing feedback. The lesson learned is the importance of employing a mix of traditional and innovative engagement tools (public meetings, online platforms, workshops, etc.) to accommodate diverse preferences and enhance participation rates.

5.3 Transparency in the Engagement Process:

Transparency in the community engagement process helped the city gain residents' trust. This was especially true when the verbally aggressive group that disrupted the City Plan process caused the city to pause the process and host a public meeting to address all the concerns this group had. The City invited all residents to a public meeting where the City clearly communicated the agenda of the City Plan and provided all residents to share their concerns. As well, the residents that had been part of the process from inception and helped form the vision, attended and shared their support at this public meeting, causing some balance in the discussion and dispelling the accusation that the City, as an agent of larger government bodies, came up with the vision to control residents and further a larger agenda of the United Nations.

5.4 Early and Ongoing Engagement:

The timing of stakeholder engagement emerged as a crucial factor in developing the Brandon City Plan. The city came out early with a project timeline, and at every stage or phase of the project, consultation was continuous and afterwards. Therefore, the constant engagement, rather than sporadic consultation at milestone moments, kept the stakeholders invested and informed throughout the process.

5.5 Turning Feedback into Actionable Insight:

The process reinforced the significance of gathering and effectively incorporating stakeholder feedback into planning decisions. I have learnt that every community engagement must translate into policies that reflect the community's desire and not just the wish of the authorities in the city.

6.0 Final Thoughts

The assessment of community engagement strategies within the Brandon City Plan development process shows the dynamics between urban planning initiatives and the diverse spectrum of stakeholder perspectives. Through this examination, it becomes evident that the essence of successful urban planning lies not solely in the technical considerations of development but profoundly in the depth and breadth of community engagement. The Brandon City Plan's journey from conception to the draft of the report offers invaluable lessons on the potency of inclusive, transparent, and responsive engagement practices in crafting urban spaces that are functional and reflective of the collective aspirations and concerns of the community. Achieving meaningful community engagement is challenging, from navigating systemic barriers that limit participation to divergent interests and expectations, as in the City of Brandon development plan case. But the end product is rewarding when everyone can proudly say we did it together.

As I reflect on the lessons gathered from the Brandon City Plan, it becomes clear that community engagement that upholds inclusivity and collaboration principles will pave the way for more equitable, sustainable, and vibrant urban environments. In closing, let us ponder on the words of Jane Jacobs (1916 – 2006) in her book The Death and Life of Great American Cities (1961), “Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they are created by everybody.” The Brandon City Plan serves as a testament to this truth, reminding us that the heart of urban development beats strongest when powered by the collective pulse of the community.

***“Cities have the capability of providing something for everybody, only because, and only when, they created by everybody.”
- Jane Jacobs (1916-2006)***

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