Effective public consultations and follow-ups? Evaluating Montréal’s municipal public hearing processes in large-scale urban developments

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Research aims:

In the past decade, the City of Montréal has made modifications to planning processes and policies in order to better inform and include the public in decision-making. These new measures consist of the creation of a public participation policy, an independent consultation body (the Office de la consultation publique de Montréal - OCPM), as well as citizen and developer guides on how to participate in or lead public consultation activities. If Montréal has succeeded in developing measures to improve and regulate its public hearing processes, it is necessary to evaluate their effectiveness and determine how their results influence the municipal council’s final decisions. By analyzing recent municipally-led public consultation processes on large scale urban developments, this research project aims to:

- compare and contrast two OCPM (MUHC Glen Yards redevelopment and Canadian National Yards in Pointe-Saint-Charles) and one borough-led (Devimco’s Griffintown) public hearing process;
- yield recommendations that address current problems and present opportunities where regulations can be improved in Montréal.

Key results to date:

All three public hearing case studies (OCPM and borough-led public consultation processes) shared characteristics, including:

- Narrow mandate of public hearing – by-law changes are only part of the concerns expressed during a public hearing process;
- Lack of a clear evaluation criteria outlined by developer, municipal officials and organizing body at outset of consultation activity;
- Poor follow-up mechanisms relating to the recommendations or concerns expressed during consultation activity;
- Lack of documentation or communication relating to how the public hearing process effects decisions;
- High risk of project’s plans changing after original public hearing process; and
- Prevalence of community-developer partnerships relating to non-urban planning related “spin-offs.”

Most importantly, borough led consultations, as opposed to those led by the OCPM, were found to be weaker in terms of the completeness of documentation presented by the project developer(s), as well as in terms of the facilitation, analysis and evaluation of concerns expressed during the public hearings. However, regardless of the source and completeness of the post-consultation report (borough or OCPM), municipal officials are equally unlikely to respond in public to concerns expressed during the public hearings.

The report’s recommendations address how authorities and stakeholders can:

- follow up with decisions after a public hearing;
- improve transparency and accessibility of documentation and decisions relating to major urban developments; and
- mitigate or respond to the inevitable changes that occur with large-scale projects.

In conclusion, the findings also begin to question the comprehensiveness of conducting a public hearing relating strictly to site-specific bylaws, especially when the influences of large-scale urban developments extend beyond the site’s boundaries.