

November 18, 2024

Budget Committee Meeting, Item 8.1

During the budget process and elsewhere, we keep hearing the word “engagement” from staff, the mayor and city councillors. They say they want to engage with residents and seem to believe that their engagement is real and effective. In the opinion of many of those residents, however, it is not.

What exactly IS engagement? Looking at definitions and the purpose of engagement put forth by numerous experts, one finds common criteria. This from Citizen Lab puts it well: QUOTE: *“The idea behind community engagement is that community members should have some power over the decisions that affect their lives. Community engagement requires an active, intentional dialogue between residents and public decision-makers. Its nature is formal: cities provide citizens with the necessary tools to get involved in decision-making. Its main challenges are identifying what is important for citizens, convincing them to engage, and offering them all the necessary information to make well-founded decisions.”*

Today’s meeting focuses on the budget, so I will speak to the engagement surrounding that. It is indicative of the problems which I believe continue to repeat themselves in Burlington with respect to all engagement with citizens.

1. The City released their proposed 2025 budget on Friday, October 25. Residents pay the property taxes and have a right to clear explanations of where that money goes. Getting a 615-page document a few short weeks before the budget is voted on does not allow for true engagement. This is an issue both for residents and council members. The councillors got the budget when we did, how can they effectively represent us with such a short time to review it and get our feedback? This does not *“provide us with the necessary tools to get involved in decision-making”* when it is almost impossible to do so in such a short time-frame.

2. Speaking of not having the necessary tools: how can any reliable feedback be given in any manner including the much-touted (and, in the

opinion of many, deeply skewed) city surveys, when we are not given the accurate numbers of what the proposed spending increase and tax increases even are? We also are missing the Flood Report and the post-2024 Transit Master Plan, which won't be issued until after the budget is passed.

Fact: City spending will increase by 8.3%; Burlington property taxes will increase by 7.5%. And yet, the number we hear over and over again from the city and the mayor is 4.97%. The city has calculated this number by blending in the education and regional taxes. I suspect that if blending in other entities' tax rates caused the Burlington rate to be higher, no such blending would occur. Asking residents if they agree with a 4.97% increase and to base their comments on that when the true increase is 8.3% completely skews any feedback.

If I went to the grocery store and filled my cart, adding up the costs of my purchases as I went, and then discovered at check-out that in fact the total is much higher because the price tags were labelled too low, I would realize that I would have made different choices along the way had I known. I would then be removing several things from my cart.

Additionally, since the Halton Region Police Service is looking for a 13.8% budget increase, which will "impact" the Halton Region increase by about 2%, this makes the continued presentation of the 4.97% number to council and the public, including at the November 4 Committee of the Whole meeting, even more misrepresentative. Your blended number, which you repeatedly reference as the "impact," will be inaccurate and too low if this is approved at Halton Region.

It would be more prudent and transparent to time the Burlington budget process to occur after the Halton Region tax rate has been set and after all reports and data necessary for budget planning have been released. Under the Strong Mayor Powers legislation, the proposed budget doesn't have to be released until February 1.

3. What else skews the feedback? Being asked to provide most of it before we even had access to the proposed budget, and therefore, zero idea

how much any of our responses would actually cost in real terms, both in dollars and in changes to other services or items.

To ask citizens to give feedback at the Food for Feedback Event without us having any context of what the implications would be if we "voted" with stickers for increases or decreases on various broadly-worded items is quite simply a flawed and cynical approach. To do so with no numbers attached is pointless. I'm shocked that anyone thinks putting stickers on a poster in this manner counts as anything. You have no idea who even attended: surely not everyone who dropped by for "free" food even lives in Burlington. Some sticker-happy souls were children. You have no idea how many people stuck all their stickers on one box. And regardless, they certainly didn't have *"all the necessary information to make well-founded decisions."* And yet we are to believe that the mayor and staff used this at least partly as a basis for preparing the proposed budget.

4. Lastly, we had the mayor's budget meetings held in each ward, again, before the proposed budget was released. Therefore, the necessary tools — the needed data and the context — were missing. And time and again when residents did try to engage - to give suggestions and opinions on asking for cuts and reductions, this feedback was met with excuses about why these would not be heeded. Stephen White and Jim Barnett spoke at the November 4 Committee of the Whole meeting about the lack of true engagement at those sessions.

I urge council and staff to look at Sherry Arnstein's "Ladder of Citizen Participation". Arnstein wrote in 1969 in the U.S. about citizen involvement and described this ladder. It has been described since as: *"a guide to seeing who has power when important decisions are being made. It has survived for so long because people continue to confront processes that refuse to consider anything beyond the bottom rungs."*

The bottom two rungs of the ladder are labeled as examples of "Non-Participation;" the middle three as "Tokenism" and the top two as "Citizen Control." I would like to quote from descriptions made by David Wilcox in describing the rungs for a UK publication (www.partnerships.org.uk/part/

[arn.htm:.\)](#). These are the rungs of the ladder that I believe we are stuck on in Burlington:

Bottom two rungs:

1 Manipulation and 2 Therapy. The aim is to cure or educate the participants. The proposed plan is best and the job of participation is to achieve public support through public relations.

The middle three "Tokenism" rungs:

3 Informing. Too frequently the emphasis is on a one way flow of information.

4 Consultation. A legitimate step ... but Arnstein still feels this is just a window dressing ritual.

5 Placation. For example, co-option of hand-picked 'worthies' onto committees. It allows citizens to advise or plan ad infinitum but retains for powerholders the right to judge the legitimacy or feasibility of the advice.

I would be happy to provide links to the Ladder and the more recent analyses of it and I'll leave my written copy with the Clerk.



Arnstein's Ladder (1969)
Degrees of Citizen Participation

I'd like to end by repeating the idea of engagement which I cited at the beginning: *"that community members should have some power over the decisions that affect their lives."*

I speak for friends and neighbours, for members of the Burlington Residents' Action Group as well as numerous other residents who have delegated or commented on various forums when I say that we do not feel that we have any power over the decisions being made with respect to the budget on how OUR money is being spent. This is NOT a community budget. True engagement must go beyond the sheer number of events termed to be "engagement"; the type and worthiness of the engagement is what matters. Let's try to get to the top of the ladder on engagement, not stay on the Manipulation and Tokenism rungs.

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