

**“I WISH THIS WAS A PARK”:  
LEVELS AND PERCEPTIONS OF PARTICIPATION IN MUNICIPAL PLANNING  
PROCESSES AMONG YOUNG ADULTS IN HALIFAX, NOVA SCOTIA**

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## ABSTRACT

The out-migration of young adults from the Maritime provinces is a demographic trend that has gained attention since a handful of highly publicized reports highlighted the issue in 2014. Participatory planning processes have been demonstrated to improve trust between stakeholders and government, to strengthen communities, to build pride in place, and to result in projects which are well-received by residents. In light of these considerations, have young people in Nova Scotia been presented with realistic opportunities to shape their largest city? This research outlines current levels of engagement in municipal consultation processes among young adults in the Halifax Regional Municipality, explores perceptions of the importance of engaging young people among planning professionals, and proposes strategies to improve the municipality's community engagement strategy so that it is more inclusive of young people.

## RÉSUMÉ

L'émigration des jeunes adultes des provinces maritimes est une tendance démographique qui a attiré l'attention depuis une poignée de rapports très médiatisés a attiré l'attention sur la question en 2014. Processus de planification participative ont été démontrées pour améliorer la confiance entre les parties prenantes et le gouvernement, pour renforcer communautés, pour construire la fierté en place, et donnent lieu à des projets qui sont bien reçus par les résidents. À la lumière de ces éléments, les jeunes ont de la Nouvelle- Écosse a présenté des opportunités réalistes pour façonner leurs grandes ville? Cette recherche présente les niveaux actuels d'engagement dans les processus de consultation municipale chez les jeunes adultes dans la municipalité régionale de Halifax, explore la perception de l'importance de faire participer les jeunes parmi les professionnels de planification, et propose des stratégies pour améliorer la stratégie d'engagement communautaire de la municipalité afin qu'elle soit plus inclusive les jeunes.

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Thank you to my father for teaching me to think, and to my mother for teaching me to care. Thank you to so many of the instructors I have had the pleasure of learning from at Saint Mary's University for showing me how to combine the two. Thank you to my grandmother for fighting breast cancer for more than 21 years and for having the strength to see me to my university graduation in good health. Thank you to Jeff Marvin for traveling the world with me, for encouraging me, and for quelling my anxieties throughout this project and others.

Lastly, thank you to the person who scrawled “I wish this was a park” in black sharpie onto the back of a conspicuously inward-facing sign at the site of a forsaken parking lot in the North End of Halifax, and to the late Douglas Adams, for critiquing the undemocratic nature of conventional urban planning processes through the medium of cheesy sci-fi novels.

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## CHAPTER 1

### PURPOSE AND STATEMENT OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM



Figure 1: Photo by Andre Fenton. Gottingen Street, Halifax, NS, 2015

I was led to the subject of this thesis in part through my academic and professional interest in participatory planning and development processes, but also by my peers. When a good friend of mine shared this image on his personal Facebook page, I was struck by the realization that so many of my own friends who do not study planning, geography or any related field, or perhaps who are not immersed in academia at all, have plenty to say about the very issues that I hope to dedicate my career to. I have noticed my friends sharing articles and opinions through social media about gentrification, active transportation, heritage properties, green space, suburban sprawl, height restrictions and even site-specific developments. At the same time, knowing them, I was fairly confident that none of these individuals were actively attending public consultation

processes for the developments they discussed readily online, and I wondered whether or not decision makers locally have had the opportunity to hear their perspectives. At the same time, as so many of my friends have passionately discussed the issues which affect their cities, others have shared their frustrations about the province as a whole, voicing the belief that the place itself seemed disinterested in allowing them to thrive. This thesis is inspired by the friends who have stayed, and the friends who have left.

The out-migration of young adults is a pervasive demographic trend in the Maritime provinces, one which has considerable implications for the health of our economy and the vibrancy of our major cities. In 2013, the province of Nova Scotia experienced a net loss of 4,272 people, half of whom were under the age of 25. Between 2009 and 2013, the number of people leaving the province increased by more than seven times (“Now or Never”, 2014; “Vital Signs”, 2014). The importance of attracting and retaining young adults in Nova Scotia is becoming a well-discussed political issue, most notably gaining attention through the publication of a report by the Ivany Commission called “Now or Never: An urgent call to action for Nova Scotians”, colloquially known as “The Ivany Report”. This report describes the fact that the out-migration of young people equates to an out-migration of skilled labour and valuable talent that could, instead, be growing and supporting our economy. As the Ivany Report describes, “[These are young people] starting careers, building families, and perhaps starting new businesses. When they leave, to a serious extent, they take the future of their communities with them” (“Now or Never”, 2014, pg. 23). Because the Ivany Report has been instrumental in raising awareness about the out-migration trend and has thus partially inspired the research questions for this project, when this thesis refers to “young adults”, it is thus referring to the young workers mentioned in the Ivany Report, typically between the ages of 20 and 35. When referring to youth, this thesis is describing



teenagers, or individuals 19 and under. While this research focuses on young adults, the scholarly literature on participatory planning has found that civic engagement strategies which target youth and school-aged individuals have a profound impact on their behaviour as they enter adulthood, and thus, youth cannot be excluded from the discussion.

While the Ivany Report explains that young adults are typically leaving in search of career opportunities in Western Canada (as evidenced by the fact that the largest share of out-migrants find themselves in Alberta), it also stresses that wages are not the sole cause of, or solution to, the problem. Community amenities and factors influencing quality of life are also important considerations (“Now or Never”, 2014), and it is within this argument that my research finds its purpose. While employment and career opportunities may be important deciding factors for many of these individuals when deciding whether to stay or go, the importance of including young people in the planning and place-making processes of their communities should also be recognized and acted upon. The needs and priorities of young people must be a key consideration in the overall planning strategies of Nova Scotian communities, if such communities hope to attract and retain young workers. With the political spotlight set toward this shrinking demographic, the question becomes: have young people in Nova Scotia been presented with realistic opportunities to shape the communities that they call home?

Given recent provincial demographic trends and the increasing popularity of participatory approaches in urban planning, this research project will investigate the extent to which young people participate in both formal and informal discussions of local urban planning issues in the most populous municipality in Nova Scotia, the Halifax Regional Municipality, hereafter referred to as HRM. Formal, in the context of this research, will refer to institutional and legislatively required consultation processes, while informal describes a more interactive and deliberative

style of meeting that is not legislatively required, as well as other participatory mechanisms, such as social media.

The Halifax Regional Municipality contains a large quantity of young adults, in part due to a high concentration of post-secondary institutions compared to other municipalities. This, coupled with greater accessibility to and more numerous opportunities to engage with formal public consultation processes compared to smaller municipalities or rural towns, makes the HRM a practical focus area for this research. This research will also investigate whether or not the language of attracting and retaining young adults has been used within the context of public consultation processes for urban planning issues in HRM, and whether planners, decision makers and young people themselves perceive engagement of young people in consultation processes to be important.

### **Research questions and objectives**

The broader research question driving this project asks: have young people in HRM been presented with realistic opportunities to participate in shaping their city? Realistic, in this sense, draws attention to the possibility that formal mechanisms for engaging residents in public consultation processes may not, in fact, be effective at reaching all demographics. Ultimately, I have found this to be the case in HRM, and the research process for this thesis has unveiled a number of barriers facing young people in relation to municipal planning consultation processes. This conclusion was reached by dividing the broader research question above into two smaller component questions to be addressed: are young adults actively participating in formal municipal planning consultation processes in Halifax Regional Municipality? And, are young adults more or less likely to participate in informal styles of public consultation, such as social media and/or

interactive meetings, compared to formal styles? To answer these questions, this thesis evaluates some examples of how online tools, formal consultation processes, and informal discussions or workshops are currently being employed in public consultation processes in the municipality. In assessing these examples, attention is paid to the nature of the interaction between planners, developers and community members, as well as the age and overarching diversity of participants. This thesis also finds that the language of attracting and retaining young people, as highlighted in the Ivany Report, is not used within the realm of urban planning and development in HRM, and addresses a number of reasons why planners and other municipal decision makers should take the issue into consideration when drafting a new community engagement strategy.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review opens with a brief history of the shift from conventional, top-down, technocratic urban planning approaches to the adoption and acceptance of participatory or collaborative planning as an ideal. It then reviews the potential benefits and drawbacks of such participatory approaches for urban planning and development processes, providing examples of real-world successes and failures. It also addresses some of the current arguments surrounding the use of social media in urban planning processes, highlighting important differences in approaches, as well as pragmatic and ethical considerations to be made when utilizing social media as a planning tool. The literature review concludes with a discussion about the engagement of youth and young adults in urban planning processes.

#### **A paradigm shift**

Much scholarly writing on the subject of collaborative or participatory planning point to “Arnstein's Ladder” as the launching point for contemporary discussions surrounding scales of participation in the urban planning process. Sherry Arnstein's 1969 theory proposed eight levels of participation, ranging from manipulation at one extreme, to citizen control at the other. The model seeks to interpret the varying levels of citizen engagement within public consultation processes, paying particular attention to where the ultimate decision-making power lies on each rung. Some forms of participation, such as those at the lower end of the ladder, simply offer citizens an illusion of participation and treat them as passive absorbers of information regarding decisions that have already been made (Arnstein, 1969). The ineffectiveness and injustice

entrenched in such “top-down” forms of urban planning inspired many in the field to invest their scholarly efforts in finding new solutions which acknowledged the value of citizen input. Meanwhile, scarcely a year before Arnstein's Ladder was first introduced, Henri Lefebvre's *Le Droit à la Ville* (Right to the City) was published, arguing that urban residents, as users of urban space, have a right to participate in the decision-making processes which shape them (Lefebvre, 1968).

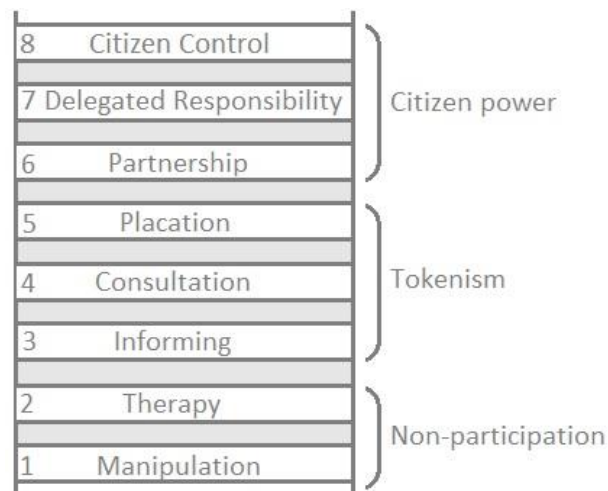


Figure 2: Sherry Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation. Adapted from Arnstein, 1969.

The release of these two works marked a paradigm shift in the urban planning profession. Building on the ideas of Arnstein and Lefebvre, researchers began to release work throughout the 1970's and 80's, which have further inspired the most noteworthy academics within the field today. One such example is Jürgen Habermas, a German sociologist, whose 1981 work *The Theory of Communicative Action* has been cited by a number of contemporary authors (Cheng, 2013; Healey, 2006; Hollander, 2011; Innes & Booher, 1999; Mattila, 2002; Valtysson, 2013). Habermas's theory asserts that the world is essentially constructed through social ideas and interactions; thus, the collective problems that are faced by societies can likewise only be

understood and addressed through open, informed and evidence-based dialogue. Habermas also asserts that, within such discussions, unfair or unequal power dynamics hinder the development of an ideal outcome and, thus, such hierarchies must essentially be left at the door (Habermas, 1984; Hollander, 2011). Habermas's model has limited practical application in reality, where human participants come from heterogeneous socioeconomic contexts, are deeply entrenched in existing sociopolitical hierarchies, and are often emotionally charged in lieu of being dispassionate and rational. This is particularly true when they believe they have something to gain or lose from a given development, which is necessarily the case for stakeholders in urban planning processes. Innes & Booher have refined Habermas' ideas to posit that *authentic* dialogue may be the more significant requirement; in order for this to be achieved, there must diverse actors present, with interdependent and/or symbiotic relationships with other actors (Innes and Booher, 1999; Hollander, 2011). Chakraborty adds to the discussion by pointing out that “rational planning” and traditional “top-down” approaches have been criticized for being biased in favour of local elites in political and economic spheres. As one example, the author addresses the phenomenon of urban renewal, which sometimes leads to gentrification, a process by which marginalized residents are displaced from their communities to make room for improvements to the area. While urban renewal can often have the positive impacts of bringing revenue to the area and sometimes improving crime rates, it can also sometimes result in the alienation of existing residents, who may no longer be able to afford to live in the gentrified area. In addition to economic disenfranchisement, gentrification can have the added effect of subduing or removing existing cultural relics and identities that have long been attached to the physical space. In the past, such questionable outcomes of superficially positive planning decisions have caused scholars and activists alike to call for a new direction in planning, and the development of

processes that include marginalized groups and more effectively represent the majority of citizens (Chakraborty, 2012).

### **Benefits of participation**

Participatory planning has been praised, not only for its capacity to avoid negative outcomes, but also for the positive effects that communities and developments may incur as a result of their engagement. Engaging stakeholders in participatory planning strategies has been shown to build social capital, improve the public's trust in institutions, build more open and effective working relationships between stakeholders, reduce public hostility, result in finished products which are more well-received by stakeholders, and improve how receptive residents are toward future developments (Campagna et al., 2014; Cilliers & Timmermans, 2014; Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Menzel & Buchecker, 2013; Pugh, 2013). Given that factors such as public mistrust and disapproval have led to the collapse of development plans in the past, it is in the best interest of developers to develop a plan of which local residents will be in favour. Likewise, it is in the best interest of residents to contribute to shaping the developments that will impact their lives in some way.

Menzel & Buchecker (2013) analyzed the ways in which participatory planning causes social effects, finding that participatory planning can help individuals in a planning group by facilitating communication, thus spreading knowledge and creating a more open environment where trust between stakeholders can grow. Worded differently, participatory planning can act as a sort of team-building exercise between participants, developers and planners, ultimately resulting in a finished project that is more widely accepted. In addition, Menzel & Buchecker show that the act of working toward superordinate goals not only increased the capacity of

stakeholders to address problems and find innovative solutions, but the social learning that occurred during participation in such processes results in an overall strengthening in the fabric of participating communities. While community ties were created and fortified during the process of participation, rather than simply “strengthening the opposition,” participating communities were actually less hostile and more open and communicative about future development plans in their neighbourhoods. Enhanced local ownership over developments is another positive social outcome from participatory planning processes, as ownership over an area of development has been linked, not only to wider use of the development, but also, in some cases, to more careful and respectful use of the development, as well as more commitment to implementation of the agreed-upon parameters (Cilliers & Timmermans, 2014; Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010; Menzel & Buchecker, 2013).

The work of Cilliers & Timmermans (2014) may provide insight as to why communities who engage in participatory planning processes are more open to future developments. The authors highlight the importance of creativity in participatory planning processes for the role it plays in “place-making”. Human geographers, planners and sociologists may be familiar with a distinction between “place” and “space”, despite the fact that the terms are often used interchangeably in everyday language. Place, these authors contend, is defined as “territories of meaning”, entrenched in the memories and sentiments of human beings. Yi-Fu Tuan is a scholar who is known for defining and differentiating space from place. According to Tuan, places are defined by the combination of experience and physical attributes. Space, on the other hand, typically deals only with the physical environment, the combination of location and literal, physical features (Tuan, 1977). Planners deal with this distinction in their daily work, as they seek to shape built environments that are livable and enjoyable for the users (Cilliers &



Timmermans, 2014). Indeed, as humans, our behaviour is often directed by emotional connections, thoughts and feelings as much (or more often) as it is by dispassionate, rational thought. As such, the thoughts and feelings of individuals are critically important to planners and developers, as they shape the way that humans will interact with the built environment, thus determining the success or effectiveness of the project. Participatory planning is valuable for the endeavour of place-making because participants, as users of an area, provide valuable insights into the way that the space functions in reality, and how it is being utilized. “Place-making”, as the act of building spaces that foster experience and meaning, has thus become a central consideration in the profession of urban planning. As the authors point out, one of the key challenges in planning for “place” is that it necessarily means planning for people, whose needs and priorities are in constant flux. Recognizing the diversity of users, and understanding their various needs and interests, is crucial if planners hope to catalyze the creation of spaces that are functional and used by the community in which they are built. Participatory planning can help to achieve this goal by identifying needs and issues that are often easy to overlook using top-down approaches (Cilliers & Timmermans, 2014).

Guillo further suggests that understanding one’s hopes, fears and expectations at an individual level can determine how we look at the future as well as our present actions (Guillo 2013). Images and conceptions of the future have a critical role to play in the development of a society because they directly impact the ways in which individuals behave. Pugh (2013) utilizes a case study of fisher-folk in Barbados and their engagement in a participatory planning strategy to illustrate just how significantly the hopes, fears and expectations at an individual level that Guillo mentions can influence the success or failure of participatory processes, and thus, have an impact on the project at large (Guillo, 2013, pg. 1). Pugh's example seeks to highlight the difference

between participants “being offered the opportunity to speak and them having discovered a voice” (Pugh 2013, pg. 1). His research shows that the largest barriers to participation are the feelings of worthlessness, insignificance and insecurity from participants, which ultimately stem from a lack of acknowledgement. Pugh closes by introducing the field of participatory planning to the work of Cavell, who demonstrates, similarly, that feelings of alienation and worthlessness, rather than lack of opportunity, are often the most problematic factors in terms of engaging participants in meaningful dialogue. Pugh addresses another social benefit of participatory planning, arguing that the collaborative or participatory planning itself is a transformative process that helps participants to learn about themselves, to grow, and to change their self-perceptions (Pugh, 2013). This implies that, by engaging a given community in a participatory planning process, organizers will likely set the stage for a more open, voluntary and honest planning dialogue in the future. His argument is echoed by several prominent scholars, including Healey (2006), Innes & Booher (1999), and Throgmorton (2003).

## **Considerations**

While the urban planning profession in North America today has largely acknowledged and embraced the concept of participatory processes, a number of case studies serve to illustrate that participation is not a tidy or flawless concept. The most obvious example of this is the sheer complexity of the word “participation” itself; many scholars simply cannot agree about what level of participation is considered appropriate, and to what degree planners should retain decision-making authority. Ultimately, it could be said that this divide is an ideological one that is unlikely to see a conclusion soon. As a result, the term “participation” itself has become a bit of a “token”, a buzzword to be used to gain approval on a project and to defend against criticism.

Hollander further argues that, while participation has been widely adopted and even legally required for most developments, it has become excessively “sterilized” - the level of formality and general ambiance of public consultation is intimidating, inaccessible and simply unappealing for many people (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). This has implications for the process, as the participants who do decide to engage are unlikely to be representative of the entire community. Similarly problematic is the fact that the participants in planning processes are not the rational and equal representatives described in Habermas's model; instead, they are flawed human beings who come armed with biases, preferences, inaccuracies, perceived social statuses and a variety of differing knowledges and concerns (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010).

One of the earliest demonstrations of the flaws in participatory planning came from Austin, Texas, where a participatory planning strategy known as “Austin Tomorrow” was first developed, in the 1970's. Busch (2015) argues that the project was unsuccessful in terms of participatory planning strategies, as it failed to consider the sociopolitical and historical context of Austin, where urban planning had historically played a significant role in the legalized oppression and segregation of racial minorities. As a result, such marginalized groups were not only mistrustful and reluctant to participate, but those who did participate had notably different agendas than participants who were not visible minorities. The differences in opinion were particularly pronounced when it came to concerns about affordable housing accessibility, poverty, and environmental and human health impacts, which stemmed from minority neighbourhoods being treated as “dumping grounds.” Busch thus contends that participatory planning strategies cannot be considered inclusive if they neglect to acknowledge discrepancies in access to resources and infrastructure, and existing social hierarchies and power dynamics (Busch, 2015).

Another notable critique comes from Cheng (2013), who compared and contrasted two case studies of grass-roots participation in China. Cheng's examples are unique, in that the scenarios they highlight did not seek to be participatory, or even to disguise themselves with such a label; the idea of collaborative or participatory planning, the author contends, is still a relatively new concept in China, and urban planning consultation processes in the country tend to operate under a “consensus-seeking” rather than “consensus-building” model. Instead, the examples highlight two cases in which the residents of communities experiencing urban development engaged in grass-roots uprisings, whereby citizens united in an attempt to topple the developments that they viewed as untrustworthy or hazardous. Since these grass-roots uprisings against the developments were either initiated or perpetuated by internet use, these examples are particularly relevant for this thesis, as they address some of the particular problems which may arise in participatory processes when online tools are used. In both cases, Cheng contends that meaningful dialogue, as defined by Habermas and others, did not occur. Rather, the power was transferred from one extreme to the next – to use Arnstein's Ladder as a model, participation, in these situations, simply jumped from the bottom rung to the top, offering no opportunity for consensus-building or two-way discussion between stakeholders. Cheng posits that these examples illustrate the way that the internet, while powerful as a tool for rallying engagement, if not utilized in a controlled and cautious way, can lead to group polarization and actually freeze discussion rather than facilitate it. The author proposes that this effect is magnified by the degree (or illusion) of anonymity that is guaranteed by the internet, and points out that such anonymity also presents a challenge, in that onlookers who have no connection to the project may still participate and sway the results of the process.

The online discussions in Cheng's examples were emotionally charged and decidedly lacking in thoughtful, two-way discussion. To some extent, this indicates the possibility that such internet movements could cause stakeholders to fall victim to "group-think" or "hopping on the bandwagon" rather than impartially evaluating the evidence that is presented by developers and planners. Both examples also demonstrate what the author refers to as a "crash in public trust", which drives stakeholders away from consensus-building processes. "The information on the internet," the author explains, "is enormous and quickly updated, only a little part of which can be carefully checked and verified ... people generally have a tendency to accept what they already believe in." (Cheng, 2013, pg. 361). Cheng's examples serve as a humbling demonstration that, while participation in theory aims to build connections and trust between stakeholders as they pursue the goal of finding the ideal solution, the extreme end of Arnstein's ladder may lead to a role-reversal and actually rob planners and developers of their power to contribute meaningfully to the project (Cheng, 2013). While one might be initially inclined to celebrate one of Cheng's examples, where residents expelled the hazardous chemical plant from their neighbourhood by banding together, one only has to consider where the chemical plant may have been placed instead to recall that the role of urban planners is to orchestrate developments such that environmental and social risks are mitigated. Should residents militantly refute all proposals without first regarding the justification for them, such developments, which will likely occur anyway, might feasibly be moved into more ecologically sensitive areas, or be thrust upon already-marginalized neighbourhoods who do not have adequate capacity or information to deter the project themselves.

## **Social media and other online tools**

In the last several decades, improvements in communications technologies, particularly the rise of the internet, have fundamentally altered the way that humans connect with one another. Given the popularity of social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram, a number of scholars have suggested that social media may prove to be an effective way of disseminating information about local real-world developments and consultation processes (Hollander, 2011; Valtysson, 2013). Some have further suggested that effectively using social media for consultation may yield higher participation rates by reaching an audience of people who might not normally attend conventional consultation meetings (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). Similarly, some have proposed that social media plays an important role in acknowledging a diversity of stakeholders who are not normally represented by traditional “town-hall” style meetings, as such meetings may yield participants from particular demographics, with relatively homogeneous interests (Enjolras et al., 2012). Available literature on the use of social media has demonstrated two distinct schools of thought surrounding how best to use social media for public consultation, which, to simplify, I will refer to in the following sections as “active participation” and “passive participation.” “Active” participation refers to using social media to connect with participants who are aware of their contribution to the project and are volunteering information for the purpose of achieving urban planning and development related agendas. “Passive” participation refers to the mining of social media for “big data,” using the information that has been publicly posted by users of social media to the advantage of planners, while the source of the information typically remains unaware of how it is being used to achieve urban planning and development related agendas.

## **Active participation**

One group of researchers offer an example that demonstrates how social media may play a role in helping consultation processes to reach new demographics. Their research, examining how the use of social media affected participation in online demonstrations, found that participants mobilized through social media tended to be of lower economic status and of younger age than participants who were mobilized by other channels (Enjolras et al., 2012). This is particularly interesting in light of a concept presented by some authors as a potential stumbling block to social media as a meaningful form of participation – the “digital divide,” which describes the potential for unequal representation due to particular socioeconomic segments of society having more or less access to web-based resources and the internet itself (Cheng, 2013; Enjolras et al., 2012; Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). Enjolras et al. (2012) also found that participation in Facebook groups had an impact on offline mobilization, offering this as evidence for the argument that social media should be viewed as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, conventional institutional processes.

Evans-Cowley & Hollander (2010) point out that conventional public participation practices are affected by unequal power relations and tend to treat stakeholders as audiences rather than partners. They propose that social media allows for elevated discourse and more democratic planning by allowing individuals to become a part of the political process. As they state, “citizens may not even realize that they are engaged in a planning process when they 'friend' a planning group on Facebook, but by doing so they are increasing awareness in their network” (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010, pg. 398). In various papers, Hollander has highlighted existing examples of online social media platforms and Massive Multiplayer Online (MMO) games being used as instruments for public consultation, while proposing potential new

directions in which the technology might be taken. Evans-Cowley & Hollander argue that true public space is growing increasingly scarce, and residents perceive a certain formality and inaccessibility associated with conventional public consultations, which threatens the principles of deliberative democracy. This same “sterilization” of planning and consultation processes, they contend, presents a stumbling block for incorporating new and innovative styles of engagement into planning, due to bureaucracy and outdated legal requirements. Virtual public spaces may help to effectively fill the void and foster a new form of civic engagement. The limitations to conventional public consultation, such as time limits, which restrain the extent to which an individual can learn about or discuss complex issues, are not of significant concern in web-based consultation processes (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010).

Pointing out that visual information, such as diagrams or maps, has been cited as the typical participant’s preferred method of receiving information, Evans-Cowley and Hollander propose that 3D virtual environments, such as those generated by MMO's, could be effective at helping participants gain insights into new developments and how they will impact existing spaces (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). In a different publication, Hollander (2011) reviews a case study of where such a platform, “Second Life,” -- which replicates real-life spaces in a 3D virtual environment -- was utilized in a joint project by the Town of Acton, Massachusetts and Tufts University to allow residents of a neighbourhood to re-design a particular block as they saw fit. Users had the option of sharing their designs online for other residents to view and comment on; Hollander found that this example provided justification for the argument that online tools can provide a forum for deliberative democracy and collaborative planning processes (Hollander, 2011).



Facebook, as possibly the most popular social media website utilized in the world today, is often pointed to in discussions about social media and engagement. Evans-Cowley and Hollander evaluated tag clouds on Facebook and other social media websites in order to find and analyze user-initiated groups that focused on planning issues. Publicly-initiated groups, they found, were typically in opposition to projects occurring at the neighbourhood level, and tended to be significantly more popular and were greater in quantity than government or institution-initiated groups, which focused more often on broader planning processes on a more regional level (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). One can observe from this finding that, while both groups are actively engaging with social media as a means of realizing their planning agendas, the groups were not in dialogue with one another or using the platforms as a forum for deliberative planning with opposing stakeholders. Participants who engage online, to reiterate the findings of Cheng, can actually help to further polarize opposing groups and form more staunch opinions, if explicit efforts are not made to connect diverse stakeholders with one another and engage them in two-way discussion (Cheng, 2013). Evans-Cowley and Hollander use a number of case studies to illustrate that the utilization of Facebook for offline mobilization, either in protest to, or support for planning and development projects, has been met with highly variable degrees of success. One contributor to the authors' research voiced the opinion that some citizens “mistake joining a Facebook group for actual action for a cause.” Facebook, the authors argue, has been effective at introducing people to causes and helping them to gain knowledge, which, in some cases, leads to participation in offline processes. Facebook has seen limited success, however, in serving as an actual platform for deliberative, participatory processes (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010). The findings of Valtysson's research on the public consultation process utilized in the rewriting of Iceland's constitution echo Evans-Cowley and Hollander's argument.

Valtysson asserts that the use of social media websites Facebook, YouTube, Flickr and Twitter, while advertised and praised as a democratizing of the consultation process, only informed the public about decisions that were being made by elite members of the political sphere. In one amusing example provided by the author, a tweet from the council of citizens elected to re-write the constitution read “16<sup>th</sup> council meeting will start in 5 minutes”, then, the following day, “16<sup>th</sup> meeting continues” (Valtysson, 2013, pg. 61). In Valtysson's example, social media provided a ruse of democracy, but its use did not result in the delegation of power to stakeholders, nor in any of the Habermasian styles of deliberation or argument between stakeholders that has been described in this literature review (Valtysson, 2013).

### **Passive participation**

Another area of focus is the “big data” generated by social media and its potential as a resource for planners. Geotagged multimedia data, in particular, has been pointed to as having potential to provide valuable information about how individuals are using and perceiving space in the real world. This data, known as volunteered geographic information, comes by way of social media users “checking in” by posting their location when they upload a thought or an image to share with their social network. One consideration to be made regarding this type of data is that the power dynamic of the so-called consultation process remains hierarchical; “participants” are treated as data sources for the planners to mine, but are not invited to participate in a deliberative or collaborative process. Indeed, “participants” by this definition are quite likely to be unaware that they are “participating” at all, which further raises ethical concerns surrounding individual privacy and consent.

Many scholars and planners nonetheless are in favour of utilizing big data in order to gain insight into popular opinions. Campagna et al. argue that the use of big data could foster democracy and sustainability in planning by allowing planners to design spaces according to the needs and priorities described by citizens themselves. These authors contend that information communications technology should be utilized to further community engagement in governance and problem solving (Campagna et al., 2014). Tasse & Hong (2014) highlight the potential benefits of using public social media data to creatively analyze the city. One of the most pertinent merits they cite is the fact that participants do not need to be “convinced” or recruited; they are already engaged in the use of social media. Further, the authors posit that geotagged data offers more precision for mapping purposes than other methods, such as call logs, because of their capacity to pinpoint geographic location using GPS rather than general dissemination areas. Tasse & Hong assert that there are a number of valuable uses for volunteered social media big data, such as mapping quality of life by analyzing post content, or planning transportation network based on mobility data (Tasse & Hong, 2014).

Yet, Campagna et al. point out that the quality of data derived from social media may be of questionable credibility. This is largely due to the fact that the use of social media, by its very nature, is performative, and users of social media are at their own discretion with respect to which information they choose to share or withhold. In the case of geotagged information, individuals are more likely to publicly “check in” to a location where they want to advertise their presence because it furthers an image of themselves which they would like to project to their audience. While they might spend more time or engage in more meaningful activities at other locations, they may choose not to share this information, as they may view it as embarrassing, personal or simply boring. To mitigate this issue and others, the authors assert that an “Advanced

Big Data Analysis” approach is the most appropriate when dealing with social media content, meaning that it should be evaluated for its content and not seek to speculate on questions of causality (Campagna et al., 2014). Tasse & Hong take a similar position, while also pointing out that certain social media sites may reflect particular demographics. For example, they suggest that Twitter, Flickr and Foursquare tend to be more active in urban areas, and are “predominantly used by young, technologically-savvy males” (Tasse & Hong, 2014, pg. 12).

Campagna et al. used the example of “Spatex,” an add-in instrument for the ArcGIS program used to assist in the analysis of social media information by retrieving social media data from Twitter and YouTube, geocoding the data, and generating tag clouds based on textual content. The authors assert that this form of geographic analysis has great potential to help planners understand user experiences, as well as to catalyze dialogue about places, planning and events. Evans-Cowley and Hollander, however, caution that online tools can easily backfire if they prove to be excessively technical for the average citizen, pointing to an example where GIS was utilized in a public participation initiative. Ultimately, this example failed, as participants perceived the methods to be inaccessible and technocratic, resulting in a crash of trust by participants, who felt they were being manipulated (Evans-Cowley & Hollander, 2010).

### **Defining engagement**

To reiterate the arguments of Guillo, the understanding of one’s hopes, fears and expectations at an individual level can determine how we look at the future as well as our present actions (Guillo, 2013, pg. 1). Pugh's case study provided evidence that there is a distinction between "being offered the opportunity to speak” and “having discovered a voice” (Pugh, 2013, pg. 1). Feelings of insignificance and insecurity present one of the largest stumbling blocks to

participation and, at the same time, participating in participatory planning processes can help to improve people's perceptions of self, of hope, and of future. Investigating the question of whether or not young people are engaged in participatory planning processes necessitates first exploring the issue of engaging young people in civic life in general, including the motivations for engagement and commonly held perceptions about engaging young people. The Canadian federal government defines “youth engagement” as “the set of youth behaviours and activities that benefit both youth and community organizations or institutions that serve civil society” (Menard, 2010, pg. 1). The reason that this definition is preferable over others is that it acknowledges that youth engagement not only benefits the individual youth participants, but also that it can, in fact, have a significant impact on society and civic life. Ballard (2014) describes “civic involvement” as being the civic activities that young people participate in, such as volunteerism, or political activity.

It is important to note that while this research project deals with the engagement patterns of young adults, many interview respondents argued that the solution to disengaged young adults lies in the engagement of children and youth. The academic literature on the subject firmly supports their assertion. As such, the subject of engaging children and youth in municipal processes will also be addressed.

### **Importance to personal development**

The benefits of being engaged in civic life in childhood, youth and young adulthood have been well documented (Ballard, 2014; McKoy & Vincent, 2007; McKoy et al., 2014; McKoy et al., 2015; Menard, 2010; Mullahey et al., 1999; Northam, 2010; Simpson, 1997). Largely, the benefits come in two main forms: improved socialization, and civic skill building. Youth who

have been engaged in civic life typically see improved self-confidence, heightened compassion for others, and improved relationships with family and peers (Menard, 2010). One critically important outcome of civic engagement in youth is that engaged youth are better able to deal with challenges in their present lives, as well as into adulthood. Overall, then, civic engagement in childhood and youth can help young people to build the skills they need to meet their goals as adults (2010). Youth and children who participate in civic life also gain valuable skills, which they can take with them into their adult civic life, as well as their respective career paths.

Engagement in civic life and in participatory processes can help youth to build skills in leadership, problem-solving, conflict resolution, decision-making and public speaking (Northam, 2014). The ability to exercise or “practice” such skills in an environment in which they can see real-world outcomes from their efforts has the further effect of validating their participation in civic life and giving them a favourable impression of civic participation (McKoy & Vincent, 2007; McKoy et al., 2014; McKoy et al., 2015; Mullahey et al., 1999; Simpson, 1997).

### **Importance to society as a whole**

Ballard (2014) states that civic involvement in youth translates into civic involvement in adulthood. Given that democracy itself is dependent on citizen engagement, it is important for states that identify as democratic to invest in activities which are proven to promote civic engagement at all stages in life. Despite this, most research suggests that young people are not presented with adequate opportunities to take part in civic life (Ballard, 2014; McKoy & Vincent, 2007; McKoy et al., 2014; McKoy et al., 2015; Simpson, 1997). This may be in part due to the aforementioned conceptualization of children and youth as “future citizens” rather than “citizens.” Adopting this view may lead opportunities for civic engagement to be trivial exercises

from which young people are unable to see tangible impact. On the other hand, when youth are invited into formal, adult institutions, their participation may take the form of “tokenism,” as described in Arnstein’s ladder, and was later reinforced in Hart’s ladder, an adaptation which applied the principle of Arnstein’s ladder to the issue of youth engagement (Hart, 1997).

The skills that youth build through civic engagement and participatory planning cannot merely be identified as a personal benefit; in fact, the building of these skills results in adults who are competent and capable in their respective career paths (Mullahey et al., 1999; Northam, 2014). Engaging young people in the development of their community or neighbourhood helps them to build community connections and establish a shared vision and sense of place (Mullahey et al., 1999). Quite often, it is the sense of place or differences in attachments to place which cause community members and non-residents to disagree about decisions impacting a particular neighbourhood. Sense of place is inherently non-rational and rooted in personal experience and emotion; thus, the expertise and logic that planners bring to the table cannot alone predict how a particular change or development might impact the fabric of a community or the way that people interact with space. Sense of place and attachment to place is quite often correlated to home ownership, length of residence in the neighbourhood, perceptions of community cohesion, and frequency of community activities (Chamlee-Wright & Storr, 2009). In light of this, it becomes clear that children and youth require a degree of investment if they are to build the connection to place that moves people to care about what happens to their community, as they are not home owners, have likely not resided “long” in the neighbourhood (compared to their elders), and may not be at a stage of emotional maturity where they can conceptualize community cohesion. Thus, the final variable – frequency of community activities – becomes key for instilling sense of community and place within youth. Simpson (1997) confirms this by pointing out that children

learn from interaction with their environment and, thus, preventing their interaction with public space – or, in this case, community activities and civic life – prevents them from developing a comprehension of the processes and the spaces in which they take place.

### **Disengagement among young people**

Northam (2014) points out that the trend of young people becoming increasingly disengaged from civic life is not simply an unwarranted complaint of older generations; voter turnouts have been found to be correlated not only to age, but also to year of birth (Barnes, 2010; Howe, 2010; Malatest and Associates Ltd., 2011; Mackinnon et al., 2007; Menard, 2010; Milner et al., 2007). Worded differently, a twenty-year-old in 2016 is less likely to vote than a twenty-year-old in 1970 would have been. This consistent trend is supported by a self-reported decrease, by young people, of interest in political life. Northam further explains that the trend becomes even more pronounced as the geographic area shrinks: young people may be unlikely to participate in federal politics, but even less likely to participate in provincial politics, and less likely still to take part in formal municipal political processes (Northam, 2014).

This phenomenon of disengagement may be at least partially explained by a simple lack of knowledge. Several studies surveying Canadian youth have found that they have significantly lower levels of knowledge about political institutions than preceding generations did (Galston, 2001; Howe, 2010; Menard, 2010). Political knowledge and formal political participation are strongly correlated; it is difficult to be invested in a political issue, party or institution that you do not understand, or one for which you are altogether unaware (Northam, 2014). One study found that the term “citizen” did not elicit any particular sentimental reaction or sense of societal obligation among surveyed youth participants, who expressed little interest in being informed



about the political world (Andolina et al., 2002). One can speculate that the lack of enthusiasm among surveyed youth may also be correlated to lower levels of knowledge than their counterparts in previous generations.

There is also evidence to suggest that a number of today's young people have low faith in politics, believing that decisions made by politicians do not directly impact them; many are also skeptical that their own capacity as voters can influence political affairs. They also tend to question the ethics of a system that they see as concentrating power in the hands of society's elite, though it is also true that many older people share this opinion (Menard, 2010). This attitude was affirmed by Andolina et al. (2002), who found that young people were "deeply distrustful of traditional political institutions and politics," (pg. 192) and believed that politics was largely a mechanism for society's elite to protect their own interests. The article used a fitting analogy, describing that young people perceived politics to be "more like billiards than pool – it is an upper class game with obscure rules that make it hard to win, and with few teachers, supporters, or players in the home neighbourhood" (Andolina et al., 2002, pg. 192).

To understand the phenomenon of disengagement among young people, one must also consider what the motivations for engagement are. In general, motivations for civic involvement can be divided into intrinsic and extrinsic motivators. Intrinsic motivators are those which come from personal values and sentiments, while extrinsic are largely reward-oriented. Among young people, the extrinsic motivations for getting engaged in civic life might be improvements to an individual's resume. Intrinsic motivations may be the desire to contribute to a cause which the individual believes in, or the goal of improving their communities. Volunteer activity has been found to be correlated to life circumstances, personality attributes, and personal needs or motivations. More specifically, Ballard (2014) found that young people were motivated to engage

in civic life due to personal causes that they were passionate about, beliefs about the importance of civic engagement, motivations relating to self-enhancement, and, perhaps most significantly for the purpose of this project, the reception of an invitation. To summarize a perhaps obvious statement, young people were more likely to engage in civic life when they had received an explicit invitation to do so. In the same study, young people identified a number of systemic barriers to their own civic engagement. Many young people indicated that they felt they lacked the resources, experience or knowledge that they needed to become engaged in civic life. While some personal barriers were also acknowledged, such as simple disinterest or ideological opposition to involvement, it is important to highlight that feelings of inadequacy are a barrier that can be easily addressed by exposure and civic education (Ballard, 2014). In light of these considerations, it is clear that if young people are not provided with opportunities to participate in civic life in a way that they perceive to be meaningful and engaging, they likely will not. Similarly, if they are not exposed to the institutions that make decisions that shape their environments, they likely will not feel adequately equipped to take part in formal civic processes when they reach young adulthood.

### **Engaging young people in urban planning processes**

The American Planning Association (APA) asserts that planners are equipped to build the capacity of young people to engage in community planning, grow their self-esteems, and even increase their levels of social responsibility and commitment. Indeed, the APA suggests that planners learn to “appreciate the gifts that youth have to offer, especially as they address the unique challenges and uncertain times that confront us,” and that “[planners] must forge opportunities for young people to attain civic competence.” (Mullahey et al., 1999, pg. 68)

Planners, they imply, are at least partially responsible for ensuring that the collective values of democratic decision-making are upheld in the present and future by building civic competency within young people.

Despite this apparent call to action, a variety of sources have mused that the realm of urban planning is highly exclusionary to young people, particularly children and youth. Simpson asserts that “demands for public participation in urban planning are not articulated in a manner which suggests that children are considered to be participants” (Simpson, 1997, pg. 917). Other authors have agreed with this statement, arguing that young people are rarely involved in any formal urban planning processes, from design, to deliberation, to policy making, and that as a result, municipal policies and plans are created with a blind eye to the needs of young people and future residents (McKoy & Vincent, 2007; McKoy et al., 2014; McKoy et al., 2015). This is likely due, at least in part, to the aforementioned conception of children and youth as “future citizens” rather than “citizens,” as well as commonly held perceptions about who is interested in planning matters, and a lack of consideration given to the societal and individual benefits of including youth in civic processes. Simpson thus posits that it is erroneous for municipal processes to use the language of “community consultation” without making an effort to consult with young people. The aforementioned conceptions effectively undermine the capacity of young people to take part in civic life, both in the present and into their adulthood (Simpson, 1997).

## **Conclusions**

The preceding literature review highlights the growing acceptance of participatory planning strategies within the realm of urban planning. It also highlights the unique situation of young people in the context of public consultation, as individuals who have internationally

agreed rights to participate in the administrative processes that impact their lives. In the context of Canada, disengagement from formal political processes is understood to be a generational trend, and it is proposed that lack of knowledge and lack of experience around formal political processes is at least partially to blame.

Participatory planning strategies have been proven to offer a host of benefits to both adults and youth who participate, from building social capital and trust, to developing tangible career skills and upholding the values of deliberative democratic engagement. Given the considerations outlined in this literature review and the unique demographic trends of out-migration of young people from the Atlantic Provinces, the following independent research will attempt to situate Halifax Regional Municipality in the context of these issues, and determine whether or not young people are participating in formal urban planning related processes within the HRM from the perspectives of both young adults and working professionals.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

#### Survey

To assess the perspective of young adults in relation to the question of whether or not they have been presented with realistic opportunities to shape their communities, a web-based survey was conducted and disseminated predominantly via Facebook. The survey was shared throughout my own social network, as well as via the PLANifax Facebook fan page, so it is important to note the possibility of bias in the results. The survey was also distributed throughout the e-mail distribution list of two Faculty of Arts departments (Geography and International Development Studies) at Saint Mary's University. The full list of questions and possible responses are available in the appendix. The survey was used to evaluate current levels of engagement and participation in planning issues among young adults. Accordingly, most of the respondents were between 20 and 25 years of age, and the questions were designed to determine the attitudes, opinions and personal feelings of respondents, under the understanding that such subjective perceptual factors will greatly influence their decision to participate. Two identical online surveys, launched on October 23 and October 27 respectively, and evaluated on November 18, 2015 yielded complete results from a combined 110 respondents. University students who study urban planning in Halifax were provided the link to one survey, while a general audience of young adults was provided with a different link, so as to keep the responses separate. The rationale for analyzing the responses separately is that individuals enrolled in urban planning programs may be more likely to participate in municipal processes due to academic requirements or interest in the subject. Of the respondents, 26 were urban planning students, and 84 were non-planning young people. Of the 84 general young people surveyed, not all were currently enrolled in post-

secondary education; some had graduated, and others had never enrolled.

## **Interviews**

Thirteen working professionals and three urban planning students were interviewed. Among those interviewed were professional urban planners and designers in municipal and private sector positions, city councillors, community council members, members of parliament, municipal and nonprofit staff who work on issues of youth engagement, urban planning professors, and urban planning students. Interviewees were recruited mainly by direct e-mail. Some were individuals that I had previously met at related meetings about community development issues, or at public consultation meetings, such as the public meetings described in Chapter 4. A handful of others, including most of the municipal staff members interviewed, were contacted via e-mail addresses found on the HRM website. Only one interviewee was known to me prior to the research, as a member of an advisory committee that provided feedback on my contribution to the 2015 Vital Signs report.

The purpose of the interviews was to gain a sense of the perspective of planners and other related professionals with respect to youth engagement. In order to understand whether or not young adults have been presented opportunities to shape their cities, I decided to evaluate whether or not young people are considered a priority to planners, and what they considered to be the most appropriate means of engaging young people. The questions posed to the interviewees were very similar to the questions posed to young survey respondents, except modified to ask what the professionals believed about young people, in lieu of what the young people believed about the processes and institutions. The interviews were relaxed and semi-structured, with a list of questions taken from the online survey to cover, but posed as they came up naturally in the

conversation. The conversations, lasting anywhere from twenty minutes to more than an hour, depending on the participant, were recorded and manually transcribed. The interview results detailed in Chapter 4 are a summary of the conclusions and common perspectives voiced by the interviewees in response to my questions.

## **Facebook**

Three Facebook pages were analyzed to evaluate their potential effectiveness as tools for consultation or information dissemination. Memberships and interactions with the page that took place in the year 2015 were counted and categorized. As publicly available data, notes were taken about the number of likes, comments, shares and views. Comments were also evaluated in terms of the degree or depth of interaction between individuals, where conversations did occur. The three pages selected were done so with intention; one municipal page, “Plan HRM,” was selected to analyze whether or not the general public was interacting with the page, and whether the municipality was using social media as a means of generating discussion. The Facebook pages of two nonprofits which exist at the intersection of engaging young people and urban planning – PLANifax and Fusion Halifax – were also analyzed. These organizations stand out as being particularly relevant to this research and both groups were brought up in conversation by a number of interviewees as examples of connection points between young people and planners in the municipality.

## **Formal and informal meetings**

During the research process, I attended four public meetings related to urban planning issues. These meetings were attended in order to gain a sense of whether or not the interviewees

and survey respondents were accurate in their summations of the nature of the public consultation processes that are employed in HRM. Head-counts were taken at each of the meetings, as well as informal field notes about the nature of communication and estimates of the number of young adults participating. Two were formal processes, one being a public information session at the Halifax Forum, and the other being a public hearing at City Hall. Two were informal, one being the initiative of a single individual who sought simply to have “a conversation” about affordable housing in the North End of Halifax. This meeting took place in a small local coffee shop. The second “informal” meeting was more structured and akin to a “town hall” style of interaction, initiated by a local nonprofit group and held in the community room of a local church. Similarly, the subject of this meeting was affordable housing and gentrification in the North End. These meetings were selected because they represent a spectrum of differing interaction styles that could be employed for public consultation purposes.

## **Limitations**

Potential limitations or biases in this research reflect the qualitative nature of the study. Because data was collected from a limited sample size and a diverse group of individuals, the perspectives and opinions they convey may not be representative of the wider community. Similarly, individuals who were willing to participate in surveys and interviews may be individuals who are already predisposed to engagement, or who feel informed enough to answer questions about the issue. The survey and social media analysis may thus not be representative of young adults as a whole, because these methods necessarily include individuals who utilize social media and exclude those who do not.



With respect to the analysis of formal and informal meetings, the aim was to get a sense of the nature of interaction and discussion in a handful of environments, and whether or not a wider diversity of individuals attended one style of meeting over another. It is worth noting that the diversity of attendants found in the informal meetings may reflect the demographics of the community that the meeting was concerned with. That is, the fact that there were more African Nova Scotian individuals present at the two informal meetings, for example, may reflect the fact that the North End of Halifax is historically a predominantly African Nova Scotian community. Only very rough estimates were made regarding the age of participants, in lieu of quantitative data, as attendance numbers were not the objective of this section of the research.

One barrier encountered during the interview phase of the project was a measure of difficulty with respect to gaining responses to interview requests from municipal urban planners. While a number of individuals from the Halifax Regional Municipality were interviewed (and, to their credit, those who agreed to be interviewed were highly responsive and eager to discuss the subject), only one interviewee currently carried the title of “planner”. Other municipal staff interviewed were community developers, councillors, urban designers and engagement coordinators, within and outside of the department of Planning and Development. Because this research deals explicitly with the role of urban planners in community consultation, the study would have benefited from more direct representation from municipal urban planners.

## CHAPTER 4

### RESEARCH FINDINGS

#### General survey results

The survey results in the following section represent a summary of key themes drawn from the survey questions that were posed to general young adults. A separate link was provided to students enrolled in urban planning programs at post-secondary institutions, the results of which will be described in a later section. A full list of the survey questions is available in the appendix.

#### Demographics

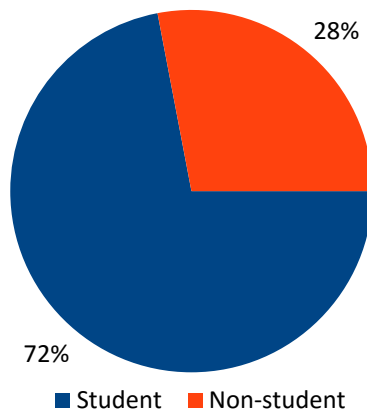


Figure 3: Proportion of student respondents

The vast majority of respondents were between 20-24 years of age. Most respondents were also currently enrolled in a post-secondary program.

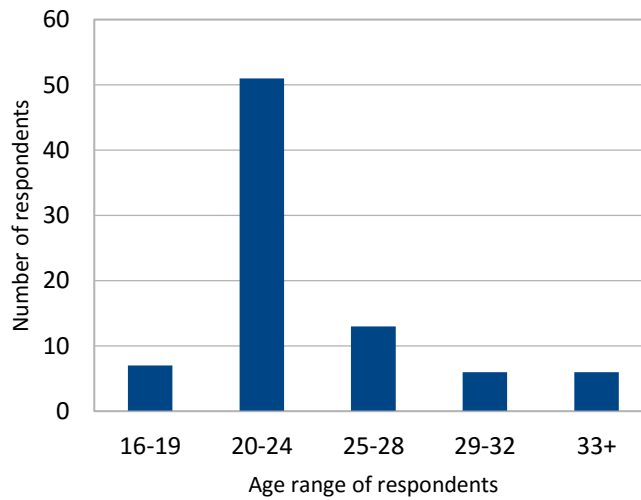


Figure 4: Age range of respondents

### Awareness

Most respondents indicated that they had some knowledge about local developments, but recognize a lack of depth in their understanding of the developments or issues surrounding them. Nearly all respondents had learned about the developments that they were aware of through a combination of personal discussion with friends and family, and social media. Many respondents similarly expressed the belief that Facebook is the most effective means of connecting with young people for engagement purposes.

### "Are you aware of any plans for developments in Halifax?"

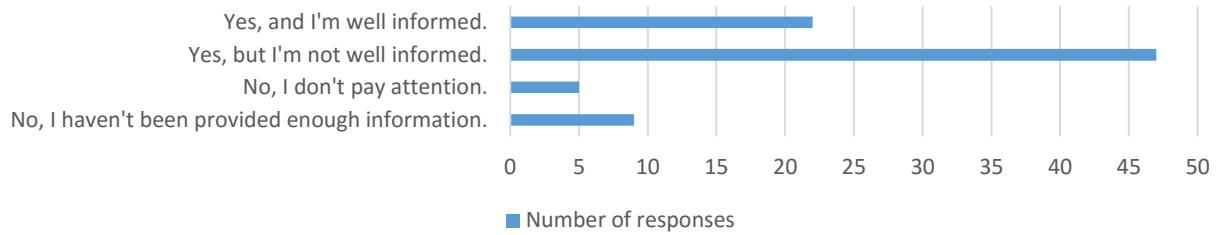


Figure 5: Self-reported awareness

### How did you hear about the developments that you are aware of?

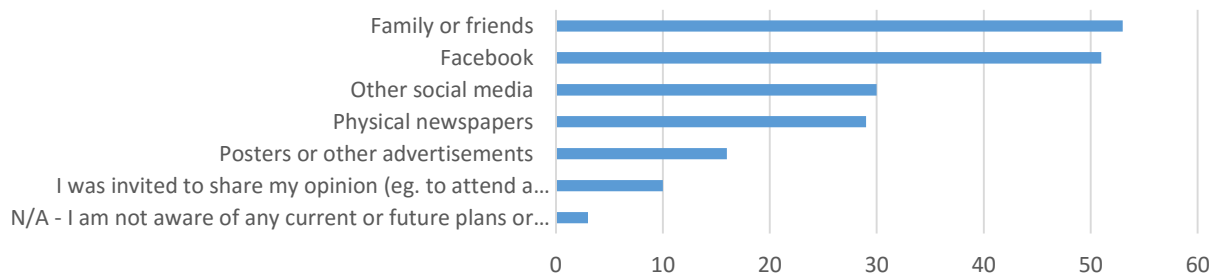


Figure 6: Information sources

Predictably, urban planning students indicated overall higher levels of awareness and confidence surrounding urban planning issues than the general respondents did, and were more likely to cite “School” as the source of their knowledge than “Friends and Family” or “Facebook” (although these were the next most popular options). Also predictably, urban planning students were more homogeneous in their responses surrounding their opinions on planning issues: namely, none of the respondents indicated that “planning issues are not a priority for them,” or that they “do not know enough to have an opinion.”

## Engagement

Were you ever invited to share your opinions about local planning and development issues?

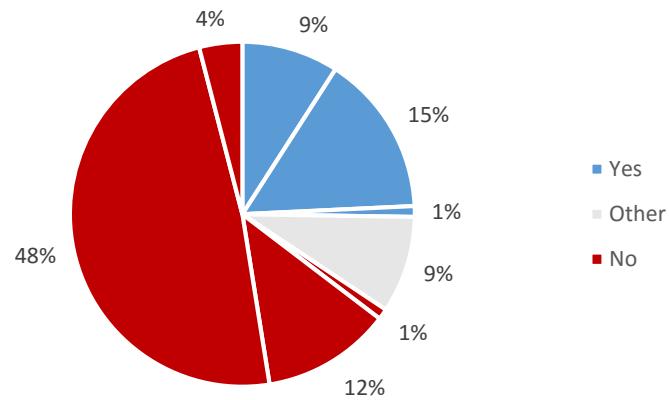


Figure 7: Invitations to consultation

Responses have been simplified, with variations of “yes” and “no” amalgamated. Full question and response options are available in the appendix.

Figures 7 and 8 show responses that have been simplified. Variations of “yes” and “no” have been amalgamated for the purpose of this chart, but the original answer options can be found in the appendix. With respect to whether or not young people are voicing their perspectives about urban development and planning issues, the overwhelming majority – two thirds - of respondents indicated that they simply had not been invited to do so. Perhaps predictably, many of those who did not believe they had been invited did not make a concerted effort to share their perspectives. Most who had been invited and did participate did so through web-based resources such as surveys or maps.

Were you ever invited to share your opinions about local planning and development issues?

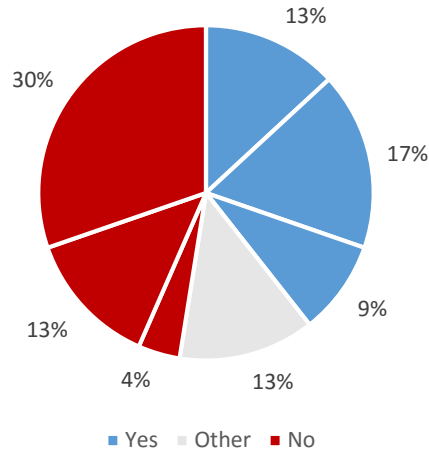


Figure 8: Invitations to consultation: Planning students

Responses have been simplified, with variations of “yes” and “no” amalgamated. Full question and response options are available in the appendix

Urban planning students were only slightly more likely to indicate that they had been invited to share their opinion about local planning issues. This is an interesting finding in light of the fact that urban planning students are likely to be fairly engaged individuals in relation to municipal planning processes, and are often required to attend municipal meetings as a requirement of their program.

### "Do you think that young people are active participants in local planning processes?"

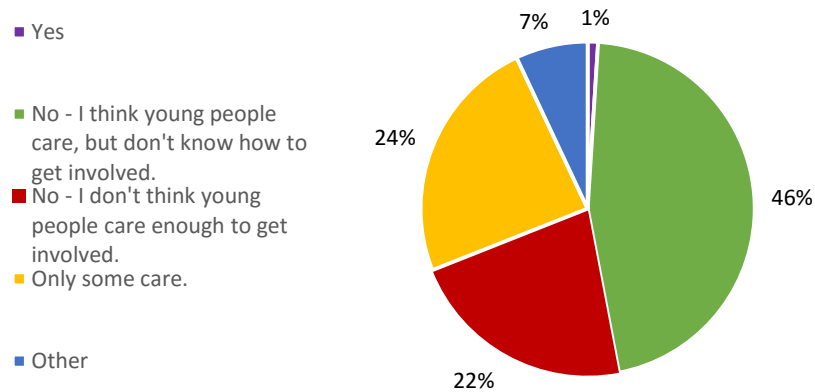


Figure 9: Perceptions of peer participation

There was disagreement among respondents as to whether the general unawareness and lack of involvement was mostly the fault of indifference on the part of young people (i.e. not making themselves informed) or whether the responsibility fell on planners, developers or other professionals (i.e. not making enough of an effort to educate and involve young people). While some respondents expressed that they simply believed young people "did not care", more of them believed that young people "did care, but did not know how to get involved". The overwhelming majority of those surveyed indicated that they, themselves, did care about the development of their city; only one respondent stated that planning issues were simply not a priority for them. After grouping variations of "yes" and "no" responses together, roughly 97% of respondents,

agreed, in some capacity, that they do care or have opinions about issues affecting their city.

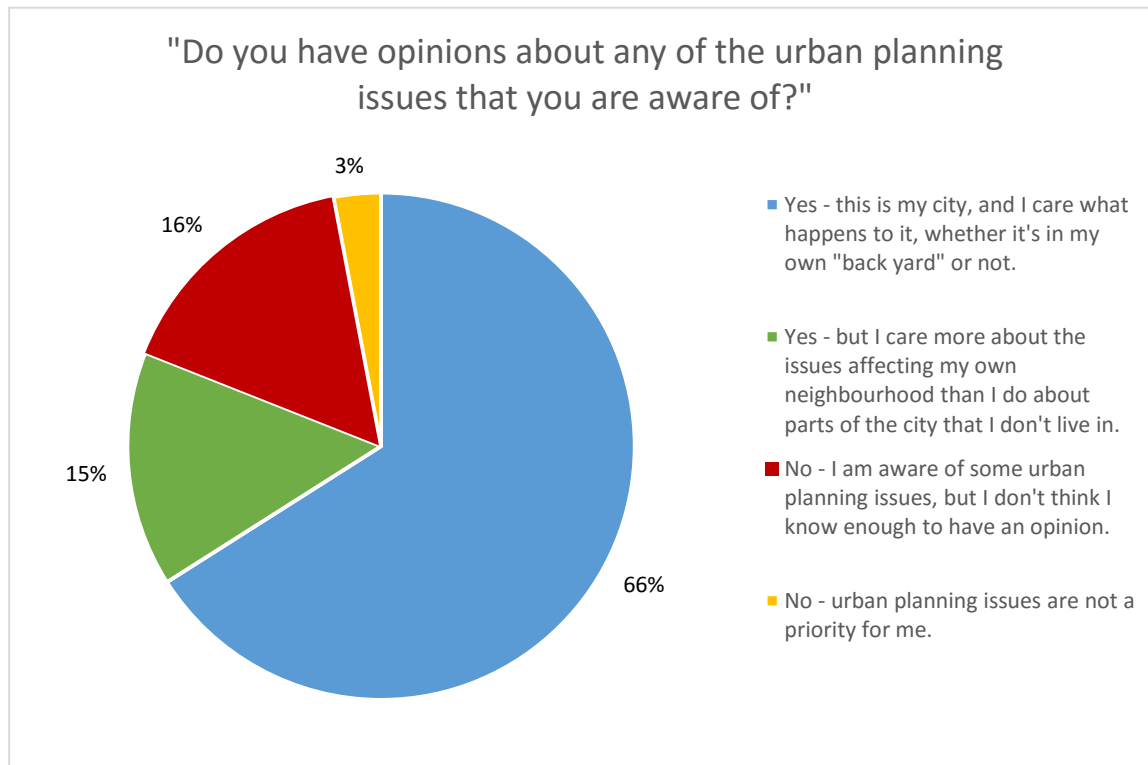


Figure 10: Opinions regarding planning issues

Responding urban planning students were more likely to indicate that they had attended a public meeting to discuss a development in their neighbourhood or city. When responding that they had not attended meetings, most indicated that they were unable to attend consultation meetings due to scheduling conflicts. Responding urban planning students had somewhat more confidence in their peers – they were less likely than the general respondents to state that young people did not care enough to get involved in urban planning issues.

### Written responses

In the written responses from the survey, the vast majority of respondents described some semblance of powerlessness with respect to local urban planning issues, explaining that they felt



that their opinions were either not sought by planners, developers or decision makers, not important enough to be considered, or not well-informed enough to be worth sharing. To use the terminology of the responses, many individuals summarized the belief that they “do not believe their opinions matter.” Some respondents stated that they believed that developers make deliberate attempts to prevent young people from becoming involved in their projects for fear that they present a possible opposition. Other respondents felt that urban planners were simply unaware that young people want to be involved, and posited that planners or developers may be making generalizations about young adults based on assumptions that they are apathetic and unlikely to stay in the city or community anyway.

Many respondents pointed out that public consultations may present a barrier for individuals who are not confident in the relevance or validity of their opinions, or for those who may have trouble with public speaking. Many also posited that young adults do not feel adequately knowledgeable to share their opinions with planners, and thus, opt to ignore the consultation processes, or keep their perspectives to themselves for fear of embarrassment. Given the irregularity of student schedules, some respondents pointed out that attending public consultation meetings is simply impractical for most young adults, as these meetings are often organized around the 9 to 5 work schedule. Many students, conversely, work evenings in retail or food industry positions, or are enrolled in night classes. A number of respondents speculated that temporary residents, such as university students, may not be invested in the development of the city because they do not view it as their permanent home, while others argued that this perception of young adults as passive and transient was deterring planners and decision makers from even attempting to engage young people at all.

Many respondents proposed that online channels provide a more convenient platform for young adults to gain information and become involved than conventional “town hall” style consultation processes, and spoke positively of online surveys in particular. Some respondents made reference to "Facebook rants" to make the point that young people are indeed paying attention and voicing their opinion, but that it often comes in the form of criticism after the event has occurred, rather than meaningful participation in the planning process. This type of input rarely makes it back to planning professionals, developers or government. Many further posited that spreading word about events using social media, such as creating “Facebook Events”, are the best way of improving turnout of young people at planning events, and conveyed the opinion that they found conventional advertising methods (newspapers, radio, etc.) to be “obscure” and “slip by unnoticed”. Virtually all respondents indicated, in some capacity, that planners could benefit from more strategic use of online media in order to inform and engage young adults. Many stated that using the appropriate media platforms (i.e. the ones that young people use) to raise awareness and advertise for participation opportunities is essential if planners hope to gain their involvement. Given the sense of powerlessness that most respondents described in this section, one respondent suggested that planners and developers be more explicit in their message that the input of young adults is valued, and that the marketing of public consultation opportunities should be modified to more effectively appeal to young adults.

The pessimism and skepticism which appeared in the general survey responses was notably absent in the responses of urban planning students. They were overall less likely to conclude that planners and developers were neglecting young adults, and more likely to propose that planners simply need to “learn how” to engage young adults. Most proposed social media as a tool that planners must harness if they hope to engage young people. One respondent argued

that consultation meetings simply need to adopt a less formal atmosphere and begin hosting events at locations where students regularly spend their time.

### **Interview results**

The following pages are a summary of qualitative information gathered through a series of informal interviews with highly varied individuals. Fourteen working professionals and three urban planning students were interviewed. Among those interviewed were professional urban planners (1) and designers (2) in municipal and private sector positions, city councillors (2), community council members (1), members of parliament (1), municipal and nonprofit staff who work on issues of youth engagement (1) and community engagement strategies (2), urban planning professors (1), and urban planning students (3). As small-scale, qualitative data, this research uses information from a limited number of participants and deals with the subjective and normative perspectives of unique individuals. The opinions and perspectives expressed by these individuals may not, as such, be representative of other professionals in their field. As such, the responses have been organized according to themes, issues and points of consensus that were drawn from the interviews. The responses of planning students are made explicit, under the understanding that, in discussions around engaging young adults, it is relevant to highlight where differences in opinion might vary by age.

#### Do young adults actively attend formal public consultation meetings?

Participants were unanimous that the majority of audience members at public hearings and information sessions were “older adults.” Three interviewees stated that young adults tended to be more likely to attend meetings pertaining to peninsular Halifax and the downtown core.

Similarly, most of the working professionals interviewed agreed that this phenomenon was due at least in part to the fact that young people are rarely property owners. Some pointed to this to illustrate the fact that young people are unlikely to have a financial stake in developments or property and, so, they do not show up to the meetings because the development does not concern them. Others used this point to contend that young people are less likely to be directly notified about neighbouring developments, and may not be showing up because they are unaware of the time, place or very occurrence of the meetings. A few interviewees made the point that the average age at non-institutional or informal meetings, such as those organized by citizens or nonprofits, was much younger; one participant estimated based on their observations that it would be in the mid-to-late twenties, while institutional hearings and consultations had an estimated average age of roughly sixty years old.

When the planning students were asked whether or not they had ever attended consultation meetings, their responses varied widely. One indicated that they had never attended such a meeting, another indicated that they attended one or two of such meetings a year. The third participant indicated that they had “maybe attended three in their life” and alluded to the fact that they attended due to it being a requirement for a class or assignment. One participant proposed that young adults are satisfied with having knowledge about what is happening and do not necessarily feel compelled to act.

### The state of participatory planning in HRM

For some interviewees, it was clear that terms such as “participation” and even “participatory planning” were interpreted to be synonymous with “notifying the public,” or “public meetings” (e.g. information sessions and hearings). Other interviewees held a more

nuanced view of participation, emphasizing the importance of engagement at multiple levels and phases, and some further posited that a creative element should be present that allows participants to see the impacts of their engagement in the finished product. Bearing in mind these varying interpretations of the term “participation,” all interviewees agreed that public participation is critically important, typically citing the satisfaction and well-being of impacted residents as a worthy reason to engage them. Most participants expressed the opinion that public consultation processes in HRM were not very engaging and questioned their effectiveness at gaining meaningful participation from residents.

As a result, when asked whether or not Halifax Regional Municipality made an effort to adopt participatory planning strategies, the responses varied dramatically. Qualitative interpretation of the responses reveals that, in the eyes of those interviewed, HRM actively holds formal and legislatively required opportunities for engagement such as public information sessions and public hearings, but largely does not engage in highly interactive or collaborative consultation strategies. A number of interviewees pointed out that the municipality is, at the time of writing, currently in the process of reviewing its community engagement strategy. The belief expressed by interviewees was that revisions to the plan would acknowledge and seek to address what they perceived to be flawed processes by legitimizing more interactive and informal meetings, and better utilizing web-based consultation tools.

The planning students expressed the perspective that consultation was “very important and very difficult,” and that “not everyone will always be happy.” They pointed out that even biased or misguided opinions need to be taken into consideration, because, in their terms, “you plan for the community,” and given that planners are rarely residents of such communities, they will “always miss something” if they do not seek the perspective of residents. Interviewees

questioned whether or not community consultation processes were being done effectively in HRM, but also in the profession as a whole. They expressed the view that planners and developers, in consultation processes, tend to frame consultation to stakeholders in terms of “Here is our plan, what do you think?” instead of “How would you do it?” The students voiced the opinion that asking for feedback instead of collaborating typically results in “head-butting” and conflict, which generally deters both planners and participants from wanting to be involved in public consultation processes.

One interviewee brought up the debate of whether or not planners should be considered “facilitators” or “specialists.” Interviewees suggested that in their opinions, the most suitable approach for a planner to take would be a two-step process by which they begin as a facilitator, asking stakeholders and communities “how they would do it”, and adding the skills and knowledge of an expert after gaining insight into the needs and priorities of participants. Interviewees pointed out that planners may be worried that including people in the actual planning process would result in personal bias and inequitable results.

#### Do planners make an effort to engage youth or young adults?

According to many interviewees, youth tend to be consulted only if they are perceived to be primary users of the space, such as in the case of libraries or skate parks. One interviewee made the statement that efforts are rarely made to engage specific demographics or groups of people; invitations for participation are assumed to be inclusive of the relevant stakeholders. Local engagement processes, in the view of most interviewees, do not make a targeted effort to engage young adults; young adults were presumed to be reached by the general invitations. Some interviewees acknowledged flaws with this approach – the traditional media for advertising

public consultation opportunities are newspaper advertisements and mailed notifications to surrounding property owners. Because young adults and youth rarely read paper newspapers, and are rarely property owners, they are largely left out of such invitations and may not be aware of engagement opportunities as a consequence.

The planning students stated that school, including both classes and their social network of planning students and professors, was where they gained most of their information pertaining to developments in HRM. In the case of information coming from their social network, the students stated that there were a number of Facebook pages dedicated to local urban planning issues, which tended to be exclusively followed by individuals who were already interested in such issues, like themselves. The participating planning students struggled to think of examples in which they felt they had been personally invited to participate in consultation strategies. One participant cited an online campaign by the province, which asked participants to place pins in parks and natural areas that held significance for them. The student pointed out that this seemed to be a successful campaign in terms of the quantity of contributions that had been made. Another confirmed that events with a strong Facebook presence were likely to have higher attendance. Interviewees agreed that they were more likely to participate in online activities, and had in the past, whereas attending meetings in-person comes at the expense of other priorities and their social lives. The timing of the meetings, they argued, caters to the 9 to 5 worker, whereas most students work evening shifts, often in retail or food establishments. Thus, the meeting times typically employed tend to occur when young people are involved in other activities, and are consequentially less convenient times than they are for older residents, who they speculated were more likely to work 9 to 5 jobs.

The students suggested that planners “wish young people would attend meetings,” and went further to propose that planners would appreciate the fresh perspective that young people bring, having heard the same discussion points from regular attendees several times before. They speculated that municipal planners may have the desire to engage young people, but are more or less oblivious with respect to how to go about connecting with them. They stated the belief that nonprofits and NGO's working on planning issues were currently more effective at targeting young people than municipal planners were.

One participant drew attention to a strategy which used to be utilized by one of their connections known as “Pint and Plan”, whereby individuals – be they planners, developers, students or residents – could “go out for beers” and have a discussion about planning issues. While the participants cautioned that there are considerations to be made about whether or not alcohol use in such an environment may inadvertently exclude some people, they highlight Pint and Plan as an example of a consultation strategy which was tailored to a younger demographic and took place in a setting which is more likely to appeal to young people than “town hall” environments. They suggested it as an example of how planners could be creative with their engagement strategies and “make it fun.”

Given the 2015 federal election that had concluded shortly before the planning students were interviewed, comparisons to voter turnouts came up in the conversation. The students used the high voter turnouts in the recent election to illustrate the opinion that social media helped to “make voting a popular thing to do,” and that, while young people may be more interested than people assume, the outreach methods currently in use are not appropriate if planners hope to connect with them. They reiterated that some planners seem to be aware of the need to use social media, but have not learned how to use it effectively.



The students also argued that online tools can sometimes result in more thorough or meaningful contributions from participants, depending on the platform in use. As one example, an interviewee contended that allowing participants to take the time to write out a long response on an online forum was more fair and more effective than “giving them two minutes at a microphone in front of a hundred people.” One student, however, acknowledged that while the process is “still going on,” planners and related bodies are hesitant to post publicly about plans due to confidentiality and legal issues. This presents an obvious barrier to using social media for participatory planning instead of just feedback on finished products.

The students, members of a student led nonprofit called PLANifax, pointed out that one of PLANifax's own agendas is to use social media to simplify issues and raise awareness. They stated that one of the biggest barriers to participation is the use of jargon and technocratic language. They argued that simplifying the issues into common terminology and attempting to “make it fun” and more easily digestible in a short amount of time can help to “get the ball rolling.” To use their words, “As soon as you bring up bylaws, you're going to lose a lot of peoples' interest.” They pointed out that when people believe themselves to be uninformed, they are unlikely to participate because they feel that their opinions or not worthy, or perhaps that they are unsubstantiated. Using methods of information dissemination that are easy to understand and accessible, such as videos, can help to combat such sentiments and help people to feel more confident in their opinions.

### Social media

Interviewees were varied in their attitudes toward social media as a mechanism for engaging young adults. Virtually all participants stressed that social media is “a tool, but not the only

tool,” and believed that it is most effectively utilized in conjunction with in-person meetings. Most of those interviewed who were experienced with youth engagement in some capacity argued that social media is not, in fact, the most effective way of engaging with youth, although a presence on some social media platforms is expected and required. Rather, these individuals believed that connecting with young people face-to-face would yield the most meaningful form of interaction and would help to develop a relationship between youth, facilitators and other stakeholders, the likes of which could not be fostered through web-based communication. Similarly, individuals who were inexperienced in dealing with youth engagement speculated that it would be best used as a tool for information dissemination, because of quality control issues due to the anonymity of web-based engagement (e.g. not knowing whether respondents are truly young adults, nor how many times they've responded, which networks it's reached or how representative it is.) Social media was viewed by many interviewees as a useful tool for organizing events and keeping existing groups cohesive, but pointed out that reaching a young audience is not as simple as “being on social media.” Some made the statement that “everyone is on social media,” regardless of age; others pointed out that the key in effectively disseminating information to young adults via social media is getting the message out through a page or group that young people already follow, rather than expecting that they will follow municipal pages.

A concern was raised by a limited number of interviewees that feedback offered on online platforms was less valuable than “face-to-face” discussion. Yet, others posited that, for some participants, online participation may be more valuable, because the formal public consultation processes are intimidating and highly restrictive. The interviewed planning students tended to agree most with the latter argument. The consensus between the planning students was that Facebook and other online resources were the most effective means of spreading the word to

young people. To quote one participant, such tools “blow council meetings, public meetings, out of the water – you may be really lucky and get 50 to 100 people at a meeting, but there are thousands online.” They argued that the use of social media was not only relevant for younger demographics, and that it could be effective at gaining the engagement of a wider demographic of participants overall. Like the working professionals, they also pointed out that online tools could not be the lone solution, and that they must be used in conjunction with conventional methods of information dissemination. They stated that while laws are still in place which require planners and developers to publish paper ads or mail notices to households for public consultations, these are likely not the most effective way of engaging young people, and the requirement may distract from the planners’ capacity to invest their time and effort into other forms of engagement.

#### Is it important to engage young people?

Interviewees who were more involved with formal urban planning processes, such as planners and planning professionals with private development companies or the municipality, were more likely than others to state that consulting young people was only important “when relevant.” For some, this meant owning a nearby property; for others, it meant being a user of the space. Interviewees who were more actively engaged with youth, as well as city councillors, were more likely to argue that engaging young people in consultation processes was important in the general sense; that young people are stakeholders in their communities and cities as current as well as future residents, and should be consulted because larger developments have the potential to impact their lives in the present and the future. Many participants stated that engaging young people in consultation processes in their younger years is a means of empowering them to be active participants in civic life as adults, and thus, youth engagement in consultation processes is

important to the vitality of current and future communities.

### Do young people care?

Only one interviewee, from the private sector, stated the belief that young people are indifferent to issues around urban form and development. The vast majority of interviewees expressed the belief that young people “could care” or “do care” but are ill equipped to engage in formal consultation processes. The planning students similarly stated the belief that young people “could care,” and while young people are likely interested in shaping their city and community, many do not realize that planning and public consultation processes are viable ways of achieving this goal. They pointed out that “urban planning issues” are typically “things that everyone can comment on,” and expressed the opinion that the subject matter itself is not boring, but rather, the jargon presents a barrier. The students re-emphasized their argument that “making it fun,” “getting creative” and “moving public consultation out of city hall” are aspects of a sort of reform that must happen in order for people to be interested, as they presently regard planning simply as a profession that some other people have, or something that is outside of their area of expertise.

Many of the working professionals interviewed also proposed that young people care about some issues, but not all, and stressed that there was nothing wrong with that. As an example, one participant related that a young adult may feel passionate about plans for a new park, green space or bicycle lane in their community, but comparatively less concerned about plans for a high-rise apartment building. According to the adult professionals interviewed, young people were likely to care most about issues relating to transportation, affordable housing, green and/or recreational space, and potential environmental impacts of developments.

A limited number of interviewees expressed the opinion that people in general, young or old, are unlikely to get involved unless they have personal interests in the development, usually manifesting itself as a negative attitude toward the proposal. To use the words of one participant, people tend to not engage in these processes unless they have “a bone to pick” with the development in question.

#### Attracting and retaining young people

The planning students, when asked, expressed the belief that part of retaining people is people being proud of their city. Discussion needs to happen in order to instill this pride in place, and interviewees proposed that planners can help to facilitate that. They were also quick to point out that planners alone cannot be responsible for attracting and retaining young people, just as employment concerns alone cannot be blamed for their departure: a collaborative effort must be made including multiple levels of government, businesses and nonprofits in order to address the issue of outmigration.

A few of the working professionals interviewed argued that young people are feeling let down and undervalued by the province. The same interviewees pointed out that urban planning and community development should be viewed as indivisible; most interviewees voiced the opinion, in some capacity, that people have a right to participate in or voice opinions about projects that affect their communities. Given that changing demographics are a community development issue, it follows that out-migration is an issue that the field of urban planning should be concerned with.

Many interviewees acknowledged that engagement in participatory planning strategies is positively correlated to overall higher levels of satisfaction with the developments in question,

and greater trust between government and communities. When the community is not appropriately consulted, most pointed out, a breakdown of trust occurs which makes residents hostile not only toward the development, but also to the governing bodies who they feel have disappointed them. In light of these concepts, a handful of participants from a variety of professions proposed that a restored sense of pride in place and trust in their municipal and provincial governments, catalyzed by engagement with participatory consultation processes, could be a useful tool in a larger political strategy to attract and retain young people in Nova Scotia. One participant extrapolated upon the importance of pride in place:

When a kid gets his or her first bedroom, what's the first thing they want to do? Paint it. Put up posters. Building the space around you builds pride in place. Engagement in [participatory planning] processes are tools for building your community, and [engagement is] absolutely a way to build pride in place. ... If you want to move someone from transience to permanence, the best way to do that is to get them involved and make them feel like a part of a community.

Involving young people in planning processes empowers them to take part in the design and development of communities that they would want to live in. While it is likely that young people will always maintain a degree of transience, one participant proposed that engaging them in these processes might have the effect of building communities that they wish to return to if they decide to plant themselves somewhere to raise a family or grow their careers. As another interviewee explained:

Young people need to feel like this is a place for them. ... As a city, if you're not willing to help that happen – if you don't give them bike lanes and green space, if you don't give them a street to hold the Gay Pride Parade, if people are suspicious of them or cops arrest them when they wander the streets in groups because there is no good public space for them, you're economically doomed, because they're going to leave.

While most interviewees acknowledged that employment issues have a large role to play in out-migration, many also voiced the opinion that it was not the only factor. “I could make

twice as much money if I worked the same job in Toronto,” one participant mused, “but I don't want to move to Toronto. People stay here because they like it here.” Another participant made a similar comment, explaining that the young people who do return to the province do so out of love for place, “with an eye to community, to local and sustainable.” A city that reflects such interests, the interviewee mused, would likely attract more of these people.

Are there barriers for any young people who are interested in becoming involved?

Lack of information and inappropriate communication mechanisms was the most cited barrier to engaging young people. Echoing the perspective of the young survey respondents, most interviewees acknowledged that the traditional methods for disseminating information and advertising consultation opportunities occur in “places that young people are not looking,” such as paper newspapers or mail-outs to property owners. Similarly, lack of knowledge around civic engagement and municipal processes was perceived to be a barrier by many interviewees. Most believed that public hearings, consultations and information sessions were intimidating environments in which young people feel unwelcome. One interviewee quipped that the typical young adult is justified in not wanting to participate in public consultation meetings:

Public meetings are boring, even if you do care – and when the importance isn't so obvious, coupled with the fact that you don't know they're happening, how could you possibly expect young people to show up? And if you're not informed, but you have opinions, you risk looking stupid. Why would youth want to show up somewhere just to feel intimidated, confused and feel like they're making fools out of themselves?”

Thus, many proposed that more open and interactive meetings and consultations may be more likely to garner interest in young people. Jargon and “planner-ese” were seen as barriers by a number of participants; all agreed that using plain language was an important step in making young adults and the general population feel less intimidated by the consultation processes.

Interacting with government staff in varying levels and departments can be similarly confusing and discouraging – one participant pointed out that this frustration is compounded by the fact that governments often undergo restructuring, and staff get reassigned to new projects, departments and tasks.

On a similar note, participants who had experience working toward youth engagement cautioned against “tokenism,” pointing out that simply having one youth representative on a committee or board is insufficient. These interviewees pointed out that youth who are active and “come to meetings” are able to easily access several hundred other youth through their schools and social networks, and that the engaged youth are more likely to receive authentic engagement and interaction than adults would. Such interviewees also pointed out that tokenism leads the involved youth to feel uncomfortable and even under-valued, which further discourages them from participating in civic processes in the future.

Transportation accessibility issues, as well as simple external life priorities, can lead young people to choose other activities in lieu of engagement opportunities. Some interviewees were dismissive of this idea as a barrier, pointing out that “being busy” is not an issue that is specific to young people. Most of the individuals who dismissed this possibility did so as a means of arguing not that young people are “lazy” or “disengaged” more than any other group, but rather that “the culture does not support their interest in community planning.”

The urban planning students proposed that people in general (not exclusive to young adults) do not want to make the time to participate in conventional consultation strategies. Online surveys and other quick solutions were viewed as significantly more effective – one participant indicated the belief that this was a “generational thing”, in part, and also simply the way that “society is evolving”. Participants recognized that much online engagement comes in the form of



“feedback” instead of “participation,” after the planning process is essentially completed, but pointed out that this is also how public consultations tend to occur – a transmission of information to an audience rather than requesting their ideas.

The lack of useful information available on the internet was lamented as a problem by all three planning students. They expressed frustration in recalling events which they would have been likely to attend, but they learned of only after they had already occurred, or “at the last minute.” One participant expressed that minutes and proceedings from public consultations are not made accessible or available in a timely fashion, presenting a barrier for young people who wish to find information. They agreed that “you really have to dig and know what you're looking for to find the meetings.” Information around times and locations of consultation meetings are not readily available on social media, or with a quick Google search, and are thus inaccessible to people who are not already immersed in planning processes. One participant suggested that the legally required notifications for public consultations appear “in the bottom corner of ‘page whatever’ of The Chronicle Herald” to illustrate the fact that information tends to be in obscure places that young adults are unlikely to find.

### Challenges in working with young people

Interviewees who were experienced in working with youth acknowledged that engaging them can be challenging. While expressed in a variety of ways, at the core of this statement seemed to be the argument that young people will quickly lose interest if they feel that they are being disrespected, ignored or communicated with in a way that seems artificial or contrived. Some interviewees pointed out that young people are particularly difficult to cater to because of constantly changing interests and trends; the things that young people are interested in one year is

unlikely to be the same thing that they are interested in the next. A number of the working professionals interviewed cited Facebook as an example of a social media platform with which young people do not engage to the extent that adults often assume; similarly, Twitter was described as relatively useless for reaching anyone under the age of 20. Interestingly, while the working professionals interviewed expressed this belief, the younger adults who responded to the online survey, as well as the planning students, widely agreed that Facebook was the most effective means of reaching them.

Another theme expressed by some of the working professionals is that young people tend to be students, and students often operate under a different “calendar year” than municipal professionals. One participant argued that it is difficult to accomplish much in the scope of a school year due to the lengthy nature of municipal processes compounded by the transience of young people as they move through the school system. The same participant argued that young people are largely unable to operate within the confines of a highly formalized consultation system where they are expected to have an understanding of terminology and legislation. While they may have ideas and attitudes about the issues that shape their city, they lack the skills and knowledge required to make their perspectives understood through the formal and legislatively required venues, such as public hearings. It is worth noting that jargon is a barrier to most residents, and is not necessarily unique to young people. Older generations may, however, have more access to opportunities to gain familiarity with the terminology and legislation by attending consultations that they receive explicit invitations to, simply by virtue of being home owners or reading the paper.

Transportation accessibility issues, as well as simple business and external life priorities, can result in low turnout of young people at meetings. In the case of programming that

specifically targets a youth audience and depends on such attendance, this can become a strain on human and financial resources. Many of the interviewees believed that improving the attendance of young people is most likely to be accomplished when the consultation opportunity occurs in a place that they are already likely to be, such as at their school, or local youth organizations.

### Solutions

To paraphrase the sentiments of most respondents, young people are unfairly expected to participate in processes with which they have no experience or understanding. Two interviewees used voting in government elections as an example, pointing out that low voter rates among young adults may be due to the fact that they know little about politics or their own political preferences, while older adults gain this knowledge through life experience. One of the PLANifax students similarly used the example of voter turnouts in light of the 2015 federal election to illustrate that information can be a powerful tool for improving levels of engagement among young adults. Indeed, some interviewees felt that adults and education systems have been doing young people (and the wider society by extension) a disservice by not making enough of an effort to equip young people with skills in civic engagement. Accordingly, a number of participants felt that civic education in childhood and youth was of great importance; one described it as “creating a culture where [civic engagement] is not foreign.” Some participants pointed out that there is strong scholarly evidence to suggest that children who participate in some form of civic engagement tend to become adults who are active in civic life.

Some participants believed that a youth advisory committee that reported to council could be a possible solution. Such an initiative did indeed take place in HRM, and was ultimately disbanded for practical and logistical reasons, as is discussed in more detail in the final chapter of

this thesis. Interviewees who were familiar with this initiative did not propose re-establishing this project, and felt that there were more effective alternatives.

Almost all participants were in favour of a shift toward more interactive and inclusive public consultation strategies; some municipal staff pointed out that HRM, at the time of interviewing, was in the process of reviewing a new community engagement strategy, which seeks to include new knowledge around participatory planning and better utilize online tools. Social media was not emphasized as being critically important for engaging young people by all of the interviewed professionals, though all acknowledged that having a social media presence in some capacity was expected, necessary and valuable. The PLANifax students and the younger of the working professionals interviewed were more likely to place importance on effectively using social media as a method for engagement. While most interviewees viewed social media as important in communicating with young people, most also stressed that it was not the only tool, and that it may not always be the most effective tool, depending on the circumstances.

### **Social media analysis**

Analysis of the social media pages reveals that Facebook has the potential to be a medium for discussion and a useful tool for raising awareness and disseminating information. The PLANifax page, which makes use of videos, has the widest reach of the examples, and is likely to be more effective at connecting with people who are not already paying close attention to planning issues. Conversely, Plan HRM and Urban Development Fusion Halifax tend to be followed by individuals who are interested in planning and may already be likely to engage. At the same time, the group structure of Urban Development Fusion Halifax is more conducive to

discussion and deliberation than the other examples.

### Plan HRM

Plan HRM is a public Facebook page operated by Halifax Regional Municipality. The municipality uses the page to advertise opportunities for public hearings and information sessions. It also shares local and international news related to urban development and design. Not all public consultation meetings are advertised via the Plan HRM Facebook page, and news articles are the most common type of post.

Overall, Plan HRM yields very few comments on posts or to the page itself. Most comments posted to the page are grievances and complaints about urban issues or the perceived incompetence of planners, councillors or developers. Other posts made by the public to the page advertise events taking place in the city. The municipality rarely responds to posts made to the page. In 2015, 195 posts were made by Plan HRM. Assuming uniformity on a month-to-month basis, this averages to 16.25 posts per month. The typical post yields between 0 and 5 likes, with as many shares. There are a small handful of anomalies which have either been entirely ignored, or conversely, have gained more attention.

### PLANifax

PLANifax is a small nonprofit volunteer organization operated mostly by students of urban planning at Dalhousie University. The group creates and shares short 4-5 minute “episodes” - documentary-like videos – as well as music videos and songs about local urban issues, often centered around transportation, with the aim of making learning about urban issues fun and accessible. They also share occasional news stories on the subject of urban form either

locally or interesting case studies and perspectives from around the world. The page is also used to share events and media relating to local events.

In 2015, 88 posts were made by PLANifax. Assuming uniformity on a month-to-month basis, this averages 7.33 posts per month. The typical post varies dramatically in the number of likes and shares. In the case of PLANifax, one could state that there is no “typical post” at all. One video from 2015 yielded 64 likes and 113 shares directly from the original page; the video itself gained 5,700 views. Other videos of theirs have actually been shared globally and viewed more than 500,000 times. On the other hand, their least popular video – not a regular episode, but a “teaser” clip – yielded only 20 views. Many posts made by the page yield between 2 and 23 likes and/or shares. Many comments made to the page are attributable to a small handful of repeat commentators. The level of interaction generated by posts is highly variable, and seems to be related to the nature and content of the post. Their most popular video was a music video parody called “The (Bus) One That Got Away”, which explored some of the reasons for oft-lamented bus tardiness in HRM.

### Urban Development Fusion Halifax

Fusion Halifax is a nonprofit organization, focusing on issues of engaging young people in HRM, seeking to build the capacity of young professionals to build and improve the city of Halifax. Central to their objectives are issues relating to civic engagement, entrepreneurship and capacity building. “Urban Development Fusion Halifax” is a request-to-join Facebook group with 314 members. In 2015, 218 posts were made within the group. Assuming uniformity on a month-to-month basis, this equates to 18.17 posts per month. Contrary to the previous two examples, there is no particular governing page administrator in the Urban Development Fusion Halifax

group. Worded differently, the posts that occur on the group are from members of the group, rather than being shared by the organization itself and responded to by fans of the page. Slightly less than 30 different individuals made new posts to the page in 2015, and about four members were particularly active. The content of the posts dealt predominantly with sharing information between interested members about events, and updates to plans and urban form within the HRM. It was also used to share interesting articles, news and case studies from other cities around the world.

The typical post yields between 1 and 10 “likes”. Many posts did not yield comments, or only yielded passing remarks. Some posts did generate conversation about the relevant issues. The longest of such conversations was 27 comments in length; other such discursive posts yielded between 10 and 20 comments. Posts in this group seemed to be more likely to generate conversation than the other groups, though the audience is narrower and restricted to members of the group. Individuals are likely only to join the group if they have an existing interest in urban planning issues.

### **Formal and informal meetings**

During the course of this research, I attended a number of meetings related to urban planning issues. At these meetings, I made very rough estimates of the age range of attendees. The intent of these “head counts” is not to gather quantitative information about attendance, but rather to evaluate the nature of the meetings and their participants in a qualitative manner, to assess whether or not they matched the descriptions provided by interview respondents, who often expressed that public consultation processes were dominated by older generations who “have a bone to pick” with the development in question. Because the intent of this component

was not to gather quantitative data, the estimates of age were not confirmed or clarified, and may not accurately reflect the nature of all public meetings.

#### Case 18388 Public information session

Halifax Forum

January 18<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 7:00pm – 9:00pm

This public information session was intended to provide information to the public and gain feedback from the public about a development to be constructed on North Street in Halifax. The content of the session revolved around revisions to a previous proposal, particularly the addition of an extra two storeys and the acquisition of an adjacent property, which would increase the size of the development to a nine storey, 106 unit residential building. The public information session was introduced as “an opportunity to receive information and provide feedback”. It is worth noting that language promoting collaboration or participation between residents, developers and planners was decidedly absent from the self-description of the event.

At this formal public information session, there were approximately 130 people in attendance. Roughly 30% of attendees appeared to be under the age of 40, a quarter of whom were children who were attending the event with their parents. With respect to the atmosphere of the session, tension between the speakers and audience members was apparent; the audience was quick to collectively correct mistakes on the part of the planners, such as mistakenly calling a local school by the wrong name. Attendees were encouraged to hold their questions until the question-and-answer period at the end of the session. When one audience member asked for the speaker to repeat a statement because he could not be heard by some of those in attendance, he was not answered, and was (perhaps rudely) informed that there would be time for questions at



the end. This meeting corroborated the descriptions and criticisms offered by interview and survey participants of formalized public meetings as highly rigid, un-interactive, and imbued with hostility between stakeholders.

#### Case 19695 & Case 19857 Public Hearing

Halifax City Hall, 1841 Argyle Street, Halifax, NS

January 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 6:00pm – 9:00pm

This public hearing dealt with two cases for developments in Halifax. One was a proposal to enter a development agreement to allow for a café to be opened at 1210-22 Henry Street, and the other was a proposal to enter a development agreement to allow for the building of a mixed-use residential and commercial building at 6393 Young Street. 33 people were in attendance, though accurate head counts are difficult to speculate, as many individuals arrived only to speak their piece about a development, and did not remain present for the duration of the meeting. Roughly 25% of audience members appeared to be under the age of 40.

In the context of this public hearing, conversation did not occur in any capacity. Local developers described their proposals, local residents were offered 4 minutes to share their attitudes, and no response to their shared perspectives was offered from the developers or from council members. This public hearing accurately reflected the descriptions by research participants of rigid and highly formalized public meetings. While hostility between developers, planners and residents was not as overt in this public hearing as it was in the other example, it remained true that the individuals who attended the event largely did so only to have their opinion about a development heard. It is likely that many individuals, young or otherwise, would consider this environment to be intimidating and unengaging.

## Community Speaks Affordable Housing

Alter Egos Café & Catering, 2193 Gottingen Street

January 20<sup>th</sup>, 2016, 6:30pm – 8:00pm

The objective of this meeting was to provide an informal discussion between community members, decision makers and other interested parties about issues related to affordable housing and gentrification in the North End of Halifax. The meeting was not organized by an institution or organization, but rather by an interested member of the community who sought to facilitate dialogue. The event was brought to my own attention through Facebook, where a total of 206 individuals indicated an interest in attending the meeting. Perhaps serendipitously, given the small area of the café, 40 individuals did attend the meeting, which still far exceeded the seating capacity of the venue. It is certainly worth noting that the participants in this meeting reflected more diversity in age, gender and ethnicity than participants of the formal meetings. Roughly 60% of attendees at this meeting appeared to be below the age of 40, and audience members were comprised of African-Nova Scotian, Aboriginal, Asian, European and mixed-ancestry individuals, as well as transgendered and gender fluid individuals. Those individuals who appeared to be under the age of 40 largely self-identified as students and working individuals in their 20's and early 30's, presumably apartment dwellers, whereas the individuals attending the public meeting appeared to be largely young families and young homeowners. The significance of this distinction is that many interviewees posited that individuals who attend formal public meetings, and further, to be aware of those meetings, were likely homeowners. The fact that numerous young people attended this informal meeting means it is likely true that a lack of information about developments and meeting times is a factor in their lack of attendance at formal consultation meetings.

It is also worth noting that among those in attendance were local residents, municipal councillors, staff of local MLA offices, interested students, private sector housing representatives, and representatives from local nonprofits concerned with public and affordable housing.

Attending municipal staff members made the verbal statement that they would prefer to minimize their own contribution to the conversation, and instead sought to listen and gain the perspectives of the community. The majority of talking was done by local residents and nonprofit representatives, except when a question was explicitly directed at a municipal representative.

The atmosphere of the Community Speaks meeting was highly informal, passionate and heated. Unlike the formal public meetings, there were no clear conclusions, actions or “deliverables” gained at the end of the meeting. It is apparent that this meeting offered a more accessible environment for young people (and others) to share their opinions on urban issues. The lack of structure within the meeting, while it lent itself to more authentic deliberative democracy and relationship building between stakeholders, did not match the efficiency or conciseness of the formal consultation processes. Worded differently, this sort of a meeting would need to be held several more times in order to begin to reach conclusions, compromise or consensus between parties, which may pose a potential barrier if it were to be adopted as a model for municipal consultation, in light of human resource and budget constraints.

### Stop Gentrification

Brunswick Street Mission, 2107 Brunswick Street

January 28<sup>th</sup>, 2016 7:00pm – 9:00pm

“Stop Gentrification” was a public meeting hosted by Nova Scotia ACORN, which describes itself as an organization comprised of low and moderate income individuals who

advocate for healthy, safe and affordable housing. They also deal with issues related to living wages, social assistance and affordable internet access. In many ways, the subject of the conversation was similar to the subject matter of the Community Speaks meeting, and a number of familiar faces were noted between the two. 63 people were in attendance, roughly 55% of whom appeared to be under the age of 40. While the audience was similarly more demographically diverse than at formal meetings, it appeared to be less encompassing than the Community Speaks meeting, and was comprised of audience members who were largely of either African-Nova Scotian or European ancestry.

While not an institutionally led or legislatively required meeting, the nature of this event was nonetheless formal and inflexible. A handful of speakers, mostly representatives of Nova Scotia ACORN and residents themselves, gave speeches describing the importance of the issue of affordable housing and emphasized the perspective that they were being economically and socially oppressed by the new condominium developments which were encroaching on their historic neighbourhood. In a similar fashion to the formal public information session, audience questions were encouraged to be held until the end of the session. Like the Community Speaks meeting, Stop Gentrification did not conclude the session with deliverables, decisions or action items which could be taken to address the issue. This point is significant because it illustrates the fact that structure and formality alone do not lead to the efficiency or outcomes that are desired in municipal planning processes, and that the most strategic approach may be to seek a balance between the extremes on the spectrum presented in these examples.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

#### **Discussion & summary**

The literature, surveys and interview responses reveal that young adults in the context of Nova Scotia are much like young adults and youth in many other cities: disconnected from the formal civic processes around urban planning, largely due to a lack of information, and partially due to lack of faith in municipal institutions. This lack of information is more pronounced for young people than it is in older adults for a handful of reasons. Most obviously, they lack the experience of interacting with formal civic processes that largely comes with age. Beginning interaction with formal civic processes at an earlier age is one solution to this problem, and a strategy for accomplishing this will be recommended in the following section. Beyond lack of experience, invitations to participate in public consultation processes in HRM are legislatively required to occur through particular channels, such as the local newspaper or mail-outs to homeowners. Municipal staff utilize their resources to fulfill these legislative requirements, and consequently, invitations and advertisements for public consultations often “miss” young adults and youth. There was an awareness on the part of both surveyed young adults and municipal staff that this was a significant barrier to young people’s engagement in public consultation processes.

Surveyed young adults also expressed the belief that they were too unqualified or uneducated about urban planning issues to contribute meaningfully to consultation processes. A number of municipal staff alluded to the possibility of this barrier, mostly by expressing the belief that technical language and jargon was a strong deterrent for all participants, including young people. In addition, when asked about why young people did not engage with municipal processes, many expressed the belief that the rigidity and intimidating atmosphere of formal

processes, coupled with the fact that young adults do not receive the same invitations to participate as home-owners do, was what kept young adults away. While surveyed young people were very likely to indicate that the timing of public meetings - oriented around the 9 to 5 worker - presented a barrier, the only interviewed professionals who mentioned this consideration were those whose careers were explicitly focused on the subject of youth engagement. This disconnect between participants may be an indication that there has been a lack of consideration on the part of planners and developers that a diversity of meeting styles and schedules must be employed, if they hope to accomplish inclusive and effective consultation with all segments of the population.

Literature shows that many young people feel mistrust toward formal institutions and government. The young adults in HRM that were surveyed mirrored these sentiments. Many survey respondents expressed the belief that the municipality and developers were simply uninterested in hearing their perspectives, and some even proposed that they were being deliberately left out of conversations about the future of the city. Many believed that urban planners were unaware that young people want to be involved, and mused that planners or developers may be making generalizations about young adults based on assumptions that they are apathetic and transient. The granules of truth in this belief are worth investigating. Very few of the interviewed professionals expressed the belief that young people were simply apathetic; many posited that any disinterest on the part of young people could be blamed on a lack of comprehension of how urban planning impacts them. All interviewed professionals, including councillors, planners, urban designers and developers, expressed the belief that the inclusion of young people in urban planning processes is very important. At the same time, all conceded that – with the exception of the now-disbanded Youth Advisory Committee, and the occasional recreation-oriented development – there had been no observable effort on the part of the

municipality to connect with youth or young adults in public consultation processes. Anecdotally, many of the interviewees expressed gratitude at the opportunity to have a conversation about the subject of this research, and stated that it prompted them to consider consultation strategies from an angle that some had not previously entertained. This is likely an indication that the language of attracting and retaining young people has simply not been a discussion within the realm of urban planning in HRM.

Virtually all interviewees and survey respondents voiced the opinion that more could be done to educate young people about urban planning and design, civic engagement, and municipal processes. Further, most interviewees expressed the belief that this education should be taking place in youth and childhood, alluding to the opinion that it is irrational to expect people, when they reach young adulthood, to participate immediately in processes with which they have never been acquainted.

One major discrepancy between surveyed young adults and interviewed professionals was the attitude toward social media as a tool of engagement. Most surveyed young adults indicated that, when they did participate in consultation processes, they did so by using online media, such as web-based surveys and mapping tools. They were similarly likely to indicate that Facebook was the most effective way of informing them about urban planning issues. Most interviewed professionals, on the other hand, believed that online tools were only a part of a larger consultation strategy, and emphasized the fact that online tools are not always the most reliable or effective. Interestingly, a handful of interview respondents expressed the belief that Facebook is “falling out of fashion” among youth, and that it was consequently not the best social media platform to be using to reach them. The majority of surveyed young adults, though, clearly identified that Facebook was a commonly utilized tool. A distinction must be made in this case

between “youth” and “young adults”, as their patterns of social media use are likely not entirely the same, and this difference in opinion may be a reflection of interviewees considering a younger demographic than those surveyed. It is also worth noting that conclusions should not be drawn based on this discrepancy, because the survey itself was disseminated largely through the use of Facebook, and thus would have been most accessible to people who were predisposed to engaging with Facebook content.

Analysis of the three social media pages is inconclusive with respect to whether or not Facebook is a useful tool for engagement. It would appear that the municipality is not using Facebook effectively if the goal is to inform people about consultation opportunities or to generate conversation, because not all consultation opportunities are advertised via the Plan HRM Facebook page, and the Plan HRM administrators do not engage in discussion with commentators to the page. Similarly, as a number of interviewees pointed out, simply informing people of an upcoming development or event is unlikely to yield participation unless people are also made to understand how it relates to their lives and communities. The Fusion Halifax Facebook group has seen more success at catalyzing discussion about local urban issues, but the limitation is that the “group” format ensures a degree of exclusivity to the conversation; it is likely that people who join and interact with this group are already somehow engaged with issues related to urban form. Lastly, PLANifax, who use videos to spread their message throughout social media, seems to be the most successful at reaching individuals who are not already engaged with planning issues, as evidenced by the “viral” nature of a select few videos. Making use of entertaining media formats such as parodies, songs and videos has been demonstrated to be the most successful at reaching wider audiences, while articles or invitations to events are links



less likely to be clicked by individuals who are not actively and explicitly engaged in discussions and activities related to urban form.

Survey respondents and interviewees alike expressed the opinion that the highly formal “town-hall” style of participation is both an unwelcome environment for young people, and not conducive to principles of deliberative and participatory decision making. The belief that less formal and more interactive styles of consultation are more likely to yield engagement from young people is supported by a few pieces of evidence. One is the anecdotal descriptions of the interviewees who have participated in both formal and informal conversations about planning issues – they explain young people are more likely to engage in dialogue in interactive and collaborative environments, or using social media, in lieu of “standing at a microphone for four minutes in front of a room full of people”, and that young people attend informal meetings more frequently than formal ones. This point is evidenced by my own attendance at both formal and informal consultation meetings, where I observed the age breakdown and level of instructiveness, ultimately finding the descriptions of interviewees to be true. At both of the informal meetings, the apparent attendance of individuals under the age of 40 was more than half of the total audience. This stands in contrast to the formally organized meetings: the public hearing had only about a quarter of attendees under the age of 40, and most were estimated to have been in their 30's. Similarly, roughly 30% of attendees to the public information session at the Halifax Forum were under the age of 40; 11 of these individuals were young children who had attended with their parents, and the remainder were estimated to have been in their 30's. Many of those in attendance at the formal meetings seemed to be homeowners and/or young families, potentially an outcome of the argument by many interviewees that invitations to formal meetings “miss” non-home-owners. The fact that the “Stop Gentrification” meeting was still a highly formal and

non-interactive meeting demonstrates the probability that the organizing groups may simply have been more effective at gaining the interest of young adults through various information dissemination methods. This, again, should be taken as evidence that municipal consultation processes would benefit from improved use of social media. The difference in attendance between formal and informal meetings may be a reflection of a preference for less formal styles of communication. It may also indicate that young people are more likely to engage in conversation around “causes” in lieu of site-specific developments.

In light of the research questions, this project has demonstrated that young adults have not been presented with realistic opportunities to shape their communities – or, at least, such opportunities, when they do occur, tend not to come from the municipality. Much of the information that young people gain about local developments comes through their social connections, and through online media, but not from the municipality. Based on feedback from the surveys, interviews and observations at both formal and informal meetings, it is reasonable to conclude that many young people participate more readily in informal styles of consultation, such as casual meetings or online tools. Young people may not be actively participating in the formal municipal planning processes facilitated by the Halifax Regional Municipality at comparable rates to other adults, but they are participating in informal discussions about urban form, development and the future of their city. As such, the following section will offer strategies and recommendations with which the municipality might use to inform a revised consultation strategy which includes young people in the processes which shape their city.

## **Recommendations**

A number of changes can be made within municipal policy to improve the scope and effectiveness of consultation processes. Because HRM's community engagement strategy for municipal planning processes is in review at the time of writing, the municipality has a unique opportunity to implement these recommendations and validate more engaging and interactive forms of consultation in legislation. The municipality would benefit from enhanced and less formalized use of social media if it seeks to reach a wider audience. By embracing interactive web-based styles of engagement such as online forums, crowdsourced maps and even photo sharing, the municipality may be able to gain the attention of young people who are interested in participating in engagement processes that allow them to share their ideas through a less formal, more creative and unintimidating medium. Beyond this, more interactive meeting styles with hands-on activities and opportunities for conversation between stakeholders should be integrated into the overall community engagement strategy alongside the existing, legislatively required meetings. It is important to note that these changes must be implemented without compromising the existing opportunities for participation, such as public information sessions and hearings, which do appeal to some residents. Further, I have found that informal and interactive styles of participation offer an opportunity for more robust communication between stakeholders, which may, in time, improve relationships and alleviate conflict between residents, government and developers. These informal meetings are also useful in early stages of projects as a mechanism for evaluating the needs, values and priorities of stakeholders. At the same time, the formal and legislatively required meetings are necessary to move the conceptual and emotional output of informal meetings into action and deliverables. These two differing style of consultation are best implemented in conjunction with one another, and the municipality would benefit from adopting

a community engagement strategy which makes room for both. By offering a variety of styles of contribution for varying comfort levels and capacities, such changes to the strategy are likely to result in more effective and inclusive public engagement for all members of the city, including young people.

As this research demonstrates, there is a clear willingness on the part of at least a portion of young adults and municipal staff to collaborate on finding solutions to community issues. It is thus recommended that the Halifax Regional Municipality view the findings of this research as an opportunity to empower youth and young adults to take part in municipal processes and changes that impact their lives in the present and future. Some municipalities around the world have recognized the need for the inclusion of youth in civic processes and have employed a variety of approaches to address the need. Among the most popular are youth advisory committees and youth councils, which the Halifax Regional Municipality (HRM) itself has previously implemented (Anguish, 2013; Northam, 2014; Simpson, 1997). The benefit to this approach is that it recognizes “the independent capacity of the child to hold and exercise rights,” and seeks to build knowledge of municipal processes through hands-on experience (Simpson, 1997). In the case of HRM, the Youth Advisory Committee, introduced in 2007, included a diverse group of youth from across the municipality and two members of Halifax Regional Council. The objective was to “develop the skills and capacity of youth in the area of civic governance” (Anguish, 2013, 2). Youth who were involved with the Youth Advisory Committee did indicate improvement in their skills in teamwork, public speaking, leadership, professionalism, and communication (Northam, 2014). Nonetheless, the HRM Youth Advisory Committee was ultimately disbanded in 2013 and replaced by a working group.

The prevailing reason for the switch, detailed in the information report submitted to the Community Planning & Economic Development Standing Committee, was that the capacity of the youth group to collaborate on and learn about municipal issues was actually constrained by their status as an official Committee of Council and the fact that they are required to adhere to Administrative Order Number One (Anguish, 2013). Administrative Order Number One “Respecting the Procedures of the Council” is a highly detailed document which governs the format of meetings and behaviour of committee and council members in the municipality during municipal meetings (Halifax Regional Municipality, n.d.). Through conversation with the facilitator, as well as consulting Northam's report on youth engagement in government in Nova Scotian communities, I have learned of further problems with the model in the context of HRM (L. Moore, personal communication, February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016; Northam, 2014). Geographic dispersion of the youth and a lack of buy-in from some council members were some of the factors which impacted the decision to disband the committee. The report detailing the disbanding of the group ultimately concluded that “the Youth to date do not feel the Advisory Committee was open and conducive to informal, honest and open feedback. Youth feel somewhat intimidated in the more formal setting” (Anguish, 2013, pg. 3; Northam, 2014). More detailed information about the factors which led to the disbandment of Halifax’s Youth Advisory Committee can be found in Northam’s research (2014).

Advisory councils are not the only method of immersing youth in civic processes around planning. There are a variety of mechanisms for empowering young people to take part in municipal processes, but the interviewees I have spoken with for this research, as well as the literature, advocate for capacity building through civic education. This recommendation is also supported by the finding that one of the largest causes of lack of engagement is that young people

do not feel adequately informed about developments or municipal processes. A model which stands out in the literature as having been well received by youth and administrative bodies alike is the “Y-PLAN” (Youth Plan Learn Act Now) model, which originated at the University of California-Berkeley. At the time of writing, the Y-PLAN model has been implemented in 16 cities worldwide and engages upwards of 12,000 young people. Y-PLAN seeks to integrate place-making and civic education by building the capacity of young people to map neighbourhood assets and challenges, with the understanding that the aforementioned are skills that they may take with them into adulthood and subsequently utilize in their civic lives. Y-PLAN operates as a project in which students work directly with civic leaders, their own school district, developers, architects, landscape architects and urban planners to complete a sort of practicum study on an authentic issue facing their neighbourhood. The program provides students with first-hand experience with independent research tools such as mapping, interviewing subjects, and on-site observation and analysis. They work collaboratively with fellow students and civic staff to identify and define problems in their communities, and engage in community-based research to find evidence-based solutions. Because the program can be aligned with regular academic goals within the public school system, such as applied mathematics, social sciences and critical thinking, it is a logical fit as a civic education course within public education curriculum. Y-PLAN utilizes a five-part agenda in order to meet its objectives, the details of which can be easily accessed on their website.

Results from cities that have implemented Y-PLAN show that participating students have built knowledge and skills that give them an advantage as they enter college, careers and citizenship as young adults. While focused on youth, the Y-PLAN model recognizes the need to build the capacity of civic leaders to appreciate and implement the insights, innovations and

suggestions offered by young people – a particularly desirable outcome in light of the laments of HRM Youth Advisory Council members that they were not effectively utilized by Regional Council for their intended purpose. Similarly, the American Planning Association (APA) argues that a lack of interest by adults in the input of children or youth, or the assumption that young people are less competent and implicitly less worthy of engagement, can be a serious barrier to the participation of young people, and accordingly, where relevant, needs to be addressed (L. Moore, personal communication, February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2016; McKoy & Vincent, 2007; McKoy et al., 2014; McKoy et al., 2015; Mullahey et al., 1999; Northam, 2014).

Beyond simply pragmatic and academic outcomes, the Y-PLAN model has also been found to be a tool for empowering disadvantaged communities and can thus doubly serve as a transformative tool for achieving social justice goals. The APA points out that many young people of ethnic minority backgrounds and those from low-income households are often alienated from conventional civic processes (Mullahey et al., 1999). When youth from marginalized communities participate in Y-PLAN, it opens up traditional and highly formalized forums for decision making to people who are often left out of civic processes. This outcome occurs not only because the marginalized youth themselves build the skills to create positive change, but also because other individuals within their personal networks, such as family members and friends of the family, will be brought to the table alongside them when the youth present their findings to the public and to council (McKoy & Vincent, 2007; McKoy et al., 2014; McKoy et al., 2015).

The Y-PLAN method has seen success in part due to some key guidelines which the program must follow. One important requirement is an authentic project. By working on a real community problem, finding real solutions based on real data and involving real stakeholders, developers and city officials, all participating parties are able to conceptualize the benefit of

engaging youth based around the real benefits that the program has brought to their community. In this way, Y-PLAN can be a community-building exercise in and of itself, serving the purpose of improving relationships between youth, older residents and city officials. This increase in communication between all stakeholders can facilitate the development of trust and understanding, a culture of cooperation which can help diverse stakeholders to achieve compromise and realize common community goals. Seeing this “real change” also serves as a source of encouragement and motivation for youth as they enter adulthood, and causes them to recognize that they have the capacity to be agents of positive change and generate tangible impacts. Similarly, students are able to perceive how the built environment and city form have an impact on the well-being of their communities. Y-PLAN also encourages youth to find practical applications for the material they learn within formal education, such as mathematics, which can be positive in terms of helping students understand the relevance of and potential future uses of their formal education (McKoy & Vincent, 2007; McKoy et al., 2014; McKoy et al., 2015).

The APA posits that using the community as a classroom offers young people “an opportunity to make sense of a complex world, to become competent decision makers capable of accessing and processing information, and to make informed choices that will affect their lives and the future of their communities” (Mullahey et al., 1999, pg. 6). In highlighting the experiences of a variety of cities which undertook programs seeking to engage youth, the APA also point out that older adults who have been involved with youth planning initiatives were overwhelmingly impressed by the level of commitment that youth participants displayed, and their ability to understand and conceptualize highly complex problems (Mullahey et al., 1999, pg. 23). In light of these statements, Y-PLAN emerges as a promising model which has seen positive



outcomes in international contexts, and aligns closely with the participatory planning principles and objectives highlighted by major planning associations.

In HRM specifically, the Y-PLAN model may help to address the flaws in the Youth Advisory Committee model by having youth work on issues that are specific to their own communities, in the context of a youth-oriented program with voluntary municipal leadership. Youth teams working within the Y-PLAN model would also not be subject to Administrative Order One, which ultimately led to the fall of the Youth Advisory Council. The Y-PLAN model has seen success in a number of communities globally, and is a program that the Halifax Regional Municipality, in conjunction with the Halifax Regional School Board and the Nova Scotia Department of Education, should consider implementing within the junior high and high school curricula. The implementation of a curriculum-based practicum course on the subject of urban planning issues is a practical way to build the capacity of children and youth to become young adults who are actively engaged in municipal participatory processes, local politics, and community-building activities. By engaging Nova Scotia children and youth in a program that challenges them to think critically and develop solutions to issues relating to their own communities, they can gain comprehension of municipal processes and begin to recognize their own capacity to be agents of positive change. Similarly, participation in such a program would help to re-build lost trust between community and local government, and dissolve misconceptions on the part of some municipal staff members surrounding the perceived apathy or incompetence of youth.

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## APPENDIX

### Survey questions and possible responses

**This research deals specifically with the participation of young adults (below 35) in local urban planning processes. What is your age?**

- 16-19
- 20-24
- 25-28
- 29-32
- 32-35

Are you a student? Yes or no. [Written]

**Are you aware of any plans for development in Halifax?**

- Yes – I have heard about a number of local plans/developments, and I believe I am well-informed about them.
- Sort of – I have heard about some local plans/developments, but I haven't looked into them too much / don't have an opinion / have only heard one side of the story.
- No – I don't pay much attention to new developments / I don't go out of my way to inform myself about them.
- No – I have heard about some local plans/developments, and I care, but I do not understand the issues completely / I do not feel that I have been provided enough information.

**How did you hear about the developments that you are aware of? Check all that apply.**

- Facebook
- Other social media
- Physical newspapers
- Family or friends discussing the issue
- I saw posters or other advertisements about it
- I was invited to share my opinion (eg. To attend a meeting, a phone survey, etc – please specify)
- N/A – I am not aware of any current or future developments or changes to the city
- Other (Please specify)

**Which of the following do you think is most effective at letting people your age know about plans and developments taking place in Halifax?**

- Facebook
- Other social media
- Physical newspaper
- Mail, flyers
- Posters
- E-mails
- Phone calls
- Other (Please specify)

**Do you have opinions about any of the urban planning issues that you're aware of?**

- Yes – this is my city, and I care what happens to it, whether it’s in my own “back yard” or not. (Example: Even though I do not bicycle regularly, it is important to me that Halifax is well-equipped with bike lanes.)
- Yes – but I care more about the issues affecting my own neighborhood than I do about parts of the city that I don’t live in.
- No – I am aware of some urban planning issues, but I don’t think I know enough to have an opinion.
- No – Urban planning issues are not a priority for me.
- Other (Please specify)

**Were you ever invited to share those opinions?**

- Yes – I attended public consultation meetings because I want to have a say in the issue.
- Yes – I participated electronically, by filling out a survey, pinning locations to a map, or sharing information via social media with the people behind the development.
- Yes – I was contacted, by phone or e-mail, by developers or planners, and I answered questions that they had for me.
- Yes – but I chose not to participate.
- No, I was not invited – but I made my voice heard by protesting the development.
- No, I was not invited – but I shared my views with developers/planners/government by writing letters/e-mails or phoning them.
- No, I was not invited – but I shared my views on the development with people in my social media networks.
- No, I was not invited, and I have not made attempts to voice my opinion.
- No – urban planning issues are not a priority for me.
- Other (Please specify)

**Have you ever been to a public meeting to discuss a development that was planned for your neighborhood or city?**

- Yes, I actively attend such meetings.
- Yes, I have attended such meetings in the past, but I am not a regular.
- No, I have never attended such a meeting because I never know when or where they are happening.
- No, I have never attended such a meeting because those developments were not a priority for me.
- Other (Please specify)

**Do you think young people are currently active participants in local planning processes?**

- Yes
- No, I think young people care, but don’t know how to get involved.
- No, I don’t think young people care enough to get involved.
- Only some are involved
- Other (please specify)

If you answered "Yes, young people in Halifax are involved / participating in urban planning processes". What have local planners been doing well, that they have been successful in recruiting young people? How did you come to this conclusion? Share your observations about peers or urban planning in Halifax, or your own personal experiences.

If you answered "No, young people in Halifax are not involved / participating in urban planning processes". What could planners be doing differently to more effectively recruit young people? How did you come to this conclusion? Share your observations about peers or urban planning in Halifax, or your own personal experiences.

[Written responses]