There are five central problems with the current budget process in the City of Winnipeg:

1) The ambiguity surrounding the release of the Preliminary Budget.
2) The complexity of the budget documents that are presented to the public, including the difficulty in comparing revenues and expenditures from year to year.
3) The short time-frame between the release of the Preliminary Budget and the final vote by Council.
4) The closed nature of the drafting of the Preliminary budget, such that Councillors who are part of the EPC do not see the budget until it is released to the public.
5) The lack of opportunity for citizen input into the budget *before* it is tabled at a Special Meeting of the EPC.

The opinion that the current budget process is closed and hierarchical has been repeated again and again by Winnipeggers from a diversity of backgrounds:

- Community Leaders
- Adrian Bata of the Canadian Taxpayers Association
- City Councillors
- City Auditor

Our intention here is not to just to criticize the existing system. We do not think that the current arrangement is the result of any malicious, anti-democratic plan at City Hall. This is the budget process that City Council has inherited. We do want to point to an alternative however, and to do that we will highlight some of the ways that other municipalities in Canada have moved towards more open, democratic, participatory, and ultimately more accountable decision-making processes.

Toronto's annual budget process lasts roughly **eight months**. (1) From September to November individual departments and agencies prepare their budget requests. City staff integrate these separate budgets into a citywide budget. (2) Residents then have the opportunity to offer input before the City

publicly launches the proposed budget in January. (4) From February to April, city councilors and administrative staff discuss and revise the proposed budget, and residents submit input through deputations at City Council's committee meetings. (5) Near the end of April, Council debates and approves the final budget.

In 2004, newly elected Toronto Mayor David Miller initiated Listening to Toronto, a public participation process for the municipal budget. A series of seven three-hour sessions held across the city, which brought together over 1,100 city residents.

Vancouver's annual budget process also begins in November, when the City releases a preliminary budget report. At this time senior finance administration briefs Council and the union representing civic employees. During the month of February City Hall engages in a public consultation process that includes polling, public forums and a media campaign requesting citizen input. The media campaign is an important part of the consultation process in Vancouver because it informs citizens about the level of services being provided and the level of taxation required to provide those services; it educates citizens and various budget stakeholders (e.g.: business groups, community organizations, unions, tax/rate paying groups, etc.) about the importance of the services the City provides in the context of Federal and Provincial downloading. In past years, when the City has expected a budget shortfall (such as the 2004 Operating Budget), public consultations have asked citizens to prioritize the programs and services they think are important and suggest levels of taxation necessary to provide those services.

Since 1999, residents of **Guelph**, ONT have used participatory budgeting to allocate a small portion of the City's budget. Through the Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition, neighbourhood groups share and redistribute resources for local community projects, such as recreation programs, youth services, and physical improvements to community facilities. The Coalition takes approximately four months to collectively decide how its budget funds are allocated, and another year to implement project funding. The budget deliberations start in

December and allocations are decided by April of the next year. The process is funded and administratively supported by the City and established community organizations, and organized and facilitated by representatives of neighbourhood groups and individual citizens.

In 2003, the **Montreal** borough of Plateau Mont Royal put in place a number of Citizens Commissions to develop issue specific policy (e.g. housing, parks and recreation, transportation planning) at the neighbourhood level. Residents are elected to the Commissions, which deliberate on issues relevant to the community and make recommendations to the Borough Council. In the Montreal municipal system the borouogh is roughly equivalent to the Community Committee level in Winnipeg.

In 2002 the City of **Saint John**, New Brunswick undertook a comprehensive public consultation process to seek input on tough budget decisions brought about by an expected deficit. Citizens were asked to fill out a detailed questionnaire designed to prioritize citizen's needs. The questionnaire could be filled out and sent in by mail, or it could be filled out online on the City's website. An online discussion forum was also set up to engage citizens in a dialogue about City spending.

Another good example of large-scale public consultation in a Canadian city is **Imagine Calgary**. Launched in 2005 as a means of incorporating many individual voices into the City's long-term planning, the 18 month long process heard from more than 18, 000 Calgarians. The long range plan that was developed out of these consultations is now being implemented by the municipal government, in concert with dozens of civil society organizations. While Imagine Calgary was not specifically a budget consultation, it serves as a good example for budget-making in two ways: (1) it shows a deep commitment to public engagement; and (2) it shows how community groups can become formal stakeholders in policy development *and* policy implementation.

These examples demonstrate five ways in which municipal governments have engaged the public in the budget-making process:

1) Stretch the time-frame for the whole budget process out, and make the period consistent from year to year, so that citizens and stakeholder groups know what to expect and know how they can get involved.
2) Make the budget documents as clear and understandable as possible and make copies of the budget readily available. Commit resources to educating the public about the services the City provides and how they are funded.
3) Solicit public feedback on a draft budget BEFORE it is tabled as the Preliminary Budget. This can be done through polling, questionnaires, focus groups, stakeholder meetings, standing committee hearings, ward hearings, town hall meetings, etc.).
4) Hold public forums in numerous ways (public meetings, online forums, television and radio forums).
5) Implement institutional mechanisms for citizens and/or representatives of citizens groups to get involved in the decision-making process in a formal and binding way.

In order to increase public participation in decision-making at City Hall, The Winnipeg Citizens' Coalition asks that the Executive Policy Committee consider the above models and implement them in Winnipeg in a timely yet appropriate manner.

The Winnipeg Citizens' Coalition is a grassroots non-partisan organization dedicated increasing public participation in city government.

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