Putting the cart before the planning horse

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IT is rare to find a planning project in Winnipeg that generates as much passionate support as the proposal for infrastructure improvements for pedestrians, cyclists and drivers on Wellington Crescent. The consistent public participation over the course of the Wellington consultation makes it particularly disappointing to witness committees of city council undervalue public input and ignore the advice of planners in the public service.

At the March 4 meeting of the public works committee, the chair, Coun. Janice Lukes, said, "Until you put the bulldozer out on the street, there is so much noise in the world that it is really hard for people to grasp what is going on." In this, she is right; it is difficult for the city to generate interest and communicate the impacts of changes to the general public.

This makes the decision of the committee to move ahead with unrealistic timelines to design and construct the permanent installations, while cancelling the pilot that would have increased awareness, all the more baffling.

Lukes introduced the call for "enhanced" awareness as part of the consultation process, but her suggestion that the city post more signs, for example, falls short on any proven enhancement — most people don't read signs about planning proposals. On the other hand, the pilot project would directly engage road users, and much like Lukes's bulldozers, make people very aware that something is happening. It would be, by design, an "enhanced" awareness tool. Nevertheless, the committee is unwilling to recommend its implementation.

The original report from the public service in the spring of 2025 recommended the installation of the relatively inexpensive temporary project from Academy to Stradbrook. It would address immediate safety concerns and, importantly, allow the city to gather more detailed input about the street's design from the local community and commuters who use the corridor. Had this recommendation been followed, the city would now be ready to evaluate the performance of the pilot project, and make plans for more permanent changes to the street.

But in July 2025, the public works committee, against the advice from planners, instead directed the public service to engage in a consultation process before installing the pilot project. Some argued that the city wouldn't want to get it wrong and have to rip it out later.

The point of a pilot project, though, is that it will be removed or changed — after lessons have been learned from its successes and shortcomings. The relative low cost of a pilot project greatly increases the chance of success for the much more expensive permanent installation — which we truly wouldn't want to rip out.

This atypical pre-pilot consultation process has delayed the possibility of any intervention on Wellington by at least nine months.

However, the consultation did gather significant feedback and lead to minor alterations to the design, which the public service brought to this month's public works meeting. The engagement team gathered feedback based on an online simulation of the proposed installation. The response numbers were strong — there were more than 8,500 visits to the website and almost 2,700 people took the time to respond to the survey. More than 50 per cent of the responses came from people who lived on or near Wellington Crescent.

After processing the feedback, active transportation planners have recommended, again, installation of the pilot project.

However, members of the public works committee argue there was not enough response to the pilot project survey. For comparison, the immediately adjacent River/Stradbrook bike lanes were installed after 312 survey responses, 29 attendees at an open house, and stakeholder meetings with just four responding property owners out of 104 invited. For the Wellington pilot project, though, nearly nine times that response rate is still deemed insufficient.

As city planning and community development researchers, we regularly see what a lay person might interpret as low levels of participation, but in fact the Wellington engagement has been well above the norm of what we would expect, certainly enough to provide valuable input to the public service. We would also expect more and better-informed engagement in response to a pilot project.

Simply gathering feedback again, immediately following a consultation where public input was ignored, is unlikely to result in higher levels of engagement. Part of the reason why public engagement often struggles with low participation is that people have lost faith that governments will meaningfully consider their feedback.

From a city planning perspective, there is a good tool to enhance awareness — a pilot project. If city council wants to pursue a strategy for Wellington that can engage in robust discussion about what the community wants, the best way to do that is by re-instating the pilot which has taken feedback into account, and not rushing a new round of consultation that they have already undermined.

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Coun. Janice Lukes and the public works committee should have stayed with the pilot project process, critics say.

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