

| BY DONOVAN TOEWS, MCIP

THE PUBLIC OPEN HOUSE: USED AND ABUSED

In the eyes of some public engagement practitioners, the public open house is seen as the ugly duckling of public engagement practice, derided as an inappropriate and inadequate engagement tool. At the same time, project managers often default to using the public open house as the only consultation tool available to them – perhaps as a means of simply satisfying that pesky consultation requirement. Is it possible that both groups are correct in their assessment of the efficacy of the public open house? Is the public open house really the ugly duckling of the consultation industry, or can it be a handsome swan in the making?

The key to understanding when and how to use the public open house effectively lies in recognizing that engagement processes ideally need to meet the needs of a *diverse* range of project interests.¹

It is unlikely that all stakeholders in a given project will be impacted by the project in the *same* way. For example, imagine a new rapid transit line planned through an existing residential neighbourhood. An individual that lives beside that line is likely to be affected in a manner that is much different, and potentially to a much greater degree, than a regular transit rider who lives elsewhere in the city but rides the system daily. Both parties have a perfectly valid interest in the project, however, it is clear that each party is going to be affected differently. Should they both be treated the same way or should the parties be engaged differently?

Engagement processes for physical planning projects such as this example

should identify *different* types and levels of interest and then engage them *differently*. This idea runs somewhat contrary to what seems to be common practice in which all stakeholders are deemed to have an equal shot at participation, and the engagement program is structured accordingly (that is, events directed to all stakeholders alike). However, an approach that treats all stakeholders the same may lead to participant dissatisfaction at the onset since, as certain consultation tools may be appropriate for some participants, but completely inappropriate for others. In the case of the public open house, the event style is simply an inadequate tool to deal with the level of sentiment from participants who may feel most directly impacted.

Here are a few suggestions illustrating how to effectively use (or not use!) the public open house as a meaningful and effective engagement tool:

- Use the public open house only once most of the stakeholder groups or individuals that are most likely to be directly or indirectly impacted² have been engaged by other more intimate means.
- Treat stakeholders that are likely to be directly impacted specially. This means not inviting a highly impacted stakeholder to a general public event as a first mode of outreach. This type of stakeholder is likely to feel the consultation effort represents an insufficient (or disrespectful) effort to engage. The right tool is likely an

