

# Civic Engagement

Civic engagement is often understood as voting or maybe taking part in a public consultation. Even in this narrow view of an engaged citizen, civic participation is low. For example, voter turnout is poor, especially for municipal elections. Only 27% of eligible voters in Kitchener and 41% in Waterloo did so in the 2010 municipal election.

There are many who want to change this situation. A broader notion of civic engagement involves participation that goes well beyond voting or election campaigns. Participation could include joining an advisory committee, school council or a neighbourhood association. Citizens might also engage more directly in taking a lead on initiatives to improve their own neighbourhood or by taking action on an issue they see as important.

Difficult economic times and changing family structures are keeping many people away from public debates and taking part in decision making, let alone taking action. This situation is compounded by a lack of public space and opportunities for people to easily get together and talk about the issues they find important. There are issues that people think are important for which they seem to be less and less willing to readily accept decisions made on their behalf. In a healthy democratic society, this should not lead to disillusionment and discontent. However, there is much to indicate this has led to a lack of trust in politicians and decision-makers rather than positive civic engagement. It is time to renew our “social contract” i.e. our mutual agreement on how we live and work together.

Municipal governments do have a role in fostering public engagement. However, elected officials and civil servants should not drive civic engagement or feel solely responsible for resolving local issues.

Independent community organizations have an important role in a healthy democracy. Trusted community-based supports, such as social planning councils, can help to make engagement processes more accessible and can contribute to ensuring there is democratic participation between elections and beyond public consultations.

## We’ve still got a way to go ...

- Support is needed so all voices in our community can speak to issues that are important to them.
- Community-based deliberations must go beyond consultations so people from different backgrounds can find common ground and develop working relationships to build on these starting points – our governments do not have to do it ‘for’ the community.
- Community members must participate in action planning **before** decisions are made.
- The community needs concrete ways for people to contribute to decision making and be encouraged to take personal responsibility for creating the community they want.
- Key partners whose mandate is to engage the community need adequate funding in order to support those who are less able to participate.

## Things to talk about:

- What is the role of non-profits and community groups in public engagement?
- What needs to be done to encourage civic participation?
- What can be done to better engage and support citizens of different backgrounds?
- How should elected officials be accountable to civic engagement processes beyond consultations?