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October 1, 2009

Dear Mayor O'Brien & Members of Council –

Re: Public Outrage, Public Participation & City of Ottawa

I have thought long about writing this letter and as a result of recent events have felt compelled to offer some thoughts and suggestions. It's challenging to know when to offer unsolicited advice! I know many of you, and believe that you are working hard to serve our community and to make the best, most informed decisions you can.

For those who I don't know, I am a consultant who specializes in public engagement – on issues of conflict and controversy. I have worked around the world, and have engaged people in painful, angry discussions on land use, environmental issues, light rail, climate change, health care, water rights, nuclear waste, school closures – a wide variety of issues.

I specialize in passion, outrage and conflict in a public engagement setting. I was the 2008 President of the International Association of Public Participation, a global non-profit advocating for and setting standards for best practises in public engagement around the world. I recently developed a course in partnership with Dr. Peter Sandman, an expert in outrage management, focused on outrage in public engagement.

Up until early 2004 I worked for the City of Ottawa, and was responsible for the award winning public participation policy passed by City Council. This letter isn't about me, but I think it is fair to say that I do have some experience in this field.

First, there is another way to do this.

It seems that with the very best of intentions, the City is consistently making choices that result in damaged public trust, destroyed relationships, public outrage and community input that is hard to use in decision making. I can imagine that is not your intent.

Light rail, another bridge over the Ottawa River, the Carp Land Fill, floods in Kanata, working with the NCC, and now Landsdowne Park – there have been enormous opportunities over the last few years to engage the community in a different way, so that you can make better lasting, sustainable decisions. These projects would suggest that you have yet to find that way.

*"Never doubt that a small group of committed people can change the world.
It is the only thing that ever has."*

- Margaret Mead



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I appreciate that you adjusted your process for Landsdowne Park to include opportunity for a “Town Hall” type process so that participants could have a say. That certainly demonstrates good intention and flexibility. I would offer that town hall meetings are great techniques to allow people to vent emotion, but unfortunately are really bad techniques for managing outrage, gathering useable input or moving a conversation forward. I’ve been known to call town hall meetings “the last of the blood sports” and I can imagine you may be feeling the same after last night.

Any kind of meaningful public engagement has at its core 3 key elements. They include:

- Decision Oriented – focused on gathering input to be used and considered in decision making, with clarity on what the issue is for discussion, and what and how the public can influence or impact that issue
- Goal Oriented – with clear objectives for what you want to achieve, how you want to get there, and what the public’s role is in that process
- Values Based – focused on what is important to people (including decision makers and the City, since this isn’t a one sided conversation), and what matters to them, designed to bring people together on what is important, not polarize them in a “yes” or “no” debate

If these 3 core elements are not present, you do NOT have meaningful public engagement. You might have communications or public relations, but not public engagement. And here is the thing – people know that. They can feel it and it makes them feel manipulated, angry, disengaged or used. We have a well educated, committed public – trying to persuade them of a course of action or suggest they are invited to a conversation, when they really aren’t, is readily apparent to them. It creates outrage.

I would offer that you might consider something called the Core Values for Public Participation, developed by the International Association of Public Participation to guide meaningful practise. You can access them by going to www.iap2.org

Alternatively, you could reference a document called the Principles for Public Engagement, which I co-created earlier this year at the request of the new Obama Administration in the U.S.A., for consideration by the newly created White House Office of Public Engagement. They are attached to this letter for your information as well.

Each year, my firm donates a portion of our time to causes and projects we believe are important. In February 2009, I wrote a letter to Kent Kirkpatrick, City Manager, offering our services in public engagement project work or training to the City in support of improved public engagement and decision making. We live here too, and I believe this City could be great, and your jobs could be easier, if you changed your approach. I didn’t receive a response to that letter but that offer stands and I look forward to your response.

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There is another way. It is possible to engage the public in a productive, meaningful way that doesn't polarize people and issues and create outrage. It is possible to make decisions, even hard ones, with increased public understanding and involvement.

I encourage you to rise to the challenge, and build some public trust and credibility along the way.

With kind regards,

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