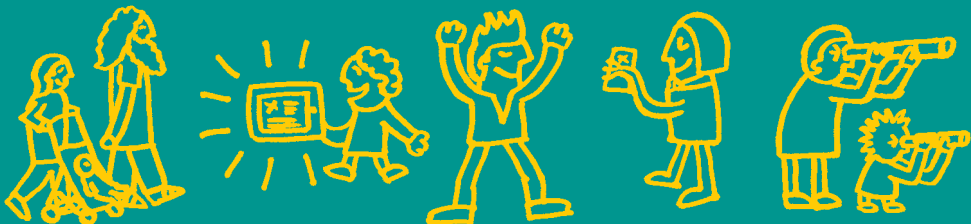




VANCOUVER  
MAYOR'S  
ENGAGED  
CITY

*Task Force*

QUICK ⚡ STARTS





# INTRODUCTION

## We live in an incredible time for communication opportunities:

a period when a vast array of free and inexpensive tools enable people from all over the world to quickly connect to one another, share ideas and participate in discussions and debates on every topic under the sun. Smart phones, instant messaging, YouTube, Skype, Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest and many other social platforms have transformed how we communicate and interact with one another. Civic governments around the world are embracing new technology and using it to improve the way they engage with citizens.

It seems ironic that such communication technologies should coincide with the decline of civic engagement and increased feelings of isolation – trends that threaten the civic fabric of our city and undermine our work to build a more affordable, greener, and stronger Vancouver. Numerous studies have documented the general decline in civic participation: decreased voting rates, the decline in volunteering, the retreat from participation in community and neighbourhood life.



While some may feel that being engaged in one's community is a 'nice to have,' others would argue that engagement is critical to the success of any community. There is a growing recognition that the larger challenges of a community cannot be addressed if the residents who make up that community remain indifferent and detached. Engagement is a key ingredient to creating a vibrant, caring and resilient community in Vancouver, one that is strong enough to address the significant challenges and opportunities our city faces in the years ahead.

How does a retreat from civic involvement impact City Hall? For decades, the City of Vancouver has invited residents to provide input on various issues being tackled by City Council: budgets, new building developments, business licenses, community planning, to name a few. At one time, the City relied heavily on public meetings, often held at City Hall, which required people to physically attend an event to learn about an issue, discuss ideas and provide their feedback. Frequently, public consultations involved only those citizens with the time, energy, language skills and confidence to communicate directly to Council.

Citizen advisory groups began in the 1970s as a way to engage the community, and now have more than 300 members. Mail, phone and later email joined the list of methods that City Council used to gather feedback. Starting in the mid-1990s, web pages were created for specific projects to help keep the public informed. Recently, for the first time, Vancouver established positions within the civil service dedicated to enhancing public engagement and exploring innovative ways to open up public policy and planning debates to a greater number of residents.

In the last three to four years, the City of Vancouver has adopted new ways to broaden its conversations with the public. 3-1-1 provides a direct point of access for questions and concerns. Four new community plans in the Downtown Eastside, Marpole, the West End, and Grandview-Woodlands are all underway and will be completed this year. The City has had significant success employing new online technologies that invite a wide range of residents into critical discussions, as evidenced by the success of the **Talk Green To Us** campaign, which engaged over 30,000 people in the creation of the **Greenest City Action Plan**.



**“Engagement is a key ingredient to creating a vibrant, caring and resilient community in Vancouver, one that is strong enough to address the significant challenges and opportunities our city faces in the years ahead.”**

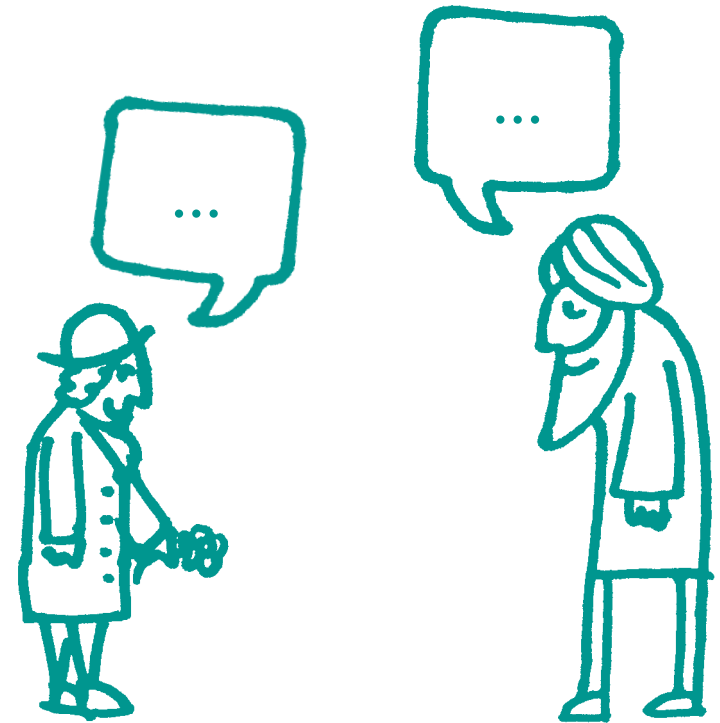


The decline in civic participation also poses a serious challenge for the health and well-being of Vancouver. This was underscored in 2012 when the Vancouver Foundation, Canada's largest community foundation, measured how connected and engaged people were in Metro Vancouver. The survey looked at the issue from three levels: people's friendships, their neighbourhood relationships, and their feelings and involvement in the larger community of Metro Vancouver.

## vancouver foundation

The Foundation's study of over 3,800 residents (1,000 of whom were living in Vancouver) identified and quantified the areas and the people who were most detached and disengaged. In particular, the survey found that 25 to 34 years olds are the most disconnected and disengaged, along with people living in condos and high rises. The study also noted growing solitudes in our neighbourhoods. While relationships with neighbours are polite, they are generally 'shallow'. The survey suggested that few residents have done a favour for their neighbour, and few participate in neighbourhood improvement activities. As well, the survey found that the more languages spoken within a neighbourhood, the less people trusted each other and the less they bothered to do things to improve their neighbourhood.

These findings present some clear challenges. Vancouver is increasingly a community of many cultures and languages. We are a city that will need to build more affordable housing, particularly multi-unit dwellings, to ensure an adequate housing supply in the coming decades. We are an urban area that wants to attract and retain younger adults. We are a community that, like many other urban centres, faces some significant social and environmental challenges.



For the City of Vancouver, the Vancouver Foundation's findings were a call to action: an opportunity to explore new ways that a municipal government could play a greater role in creating a more engaged community.

*What could a city government do to get more residents, particularly those aged 25 to 34, engaged in civic life and decision making?*

*How could the City enhance its use of social media tools for policy development?*

*How could a city government facilitate and strengthen relationships between and among neighbours of different cultures?*

*How could it improve signage and communications materials?*

The first step towards answering those questions was the creation of an **Engaged City Task Force**, and with it, an interim report composed of Quick Start recommendations. We hope that City Council will embrace these recommendations and quickly move forward on a path to fostering a stronger, more engaged and connected city of neighbourhoods in Vancouver.



# THE MAYOR'S ENGAGED CITY TASK FORCE:



On October 3, 2012 Vancouver City Council passed a motion to create the Mayor's Engaged City Task Force. The goal of the task force was:

*“to examine innovative best practices for civic engagement, and seek to make progress on priority issues including improving the way the City communicates with citizens, engages immigrants and youth, consults on policy, increases voter turnout and enables community connection at a neighbourhood level.”*

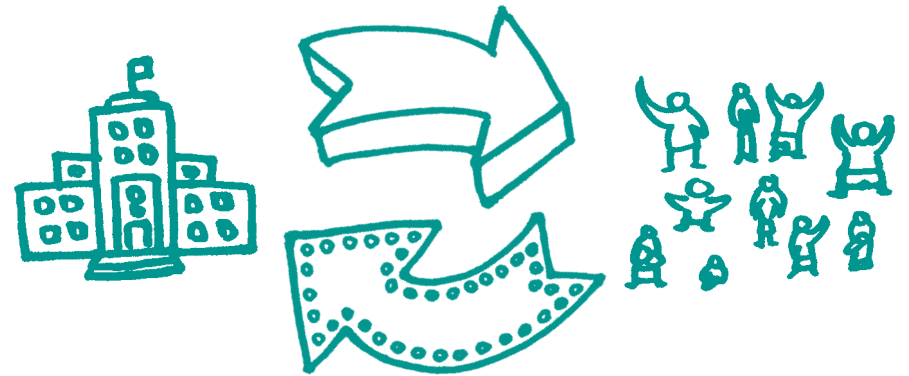
Residents of Vancouver were invited to apply and more than 100 applications were received. Particular attention was paid to recruiting individuals who represented the geographic areas of the city, had experience engaging individuals 25 to 34 years of age, and expertise in using social media for community engagement.

On December 5, 2012 Mayor Robertson announced the 22 members of the Task Force. The group represents a broad cross-section of ages, backgrounds and professions. What we have in common is knowledge, experience and commitment to community public engagement in Vancouver. Even with 22 members, we recognize it is not perfect and impossible to fully represent such a diverse city like Vancouver.

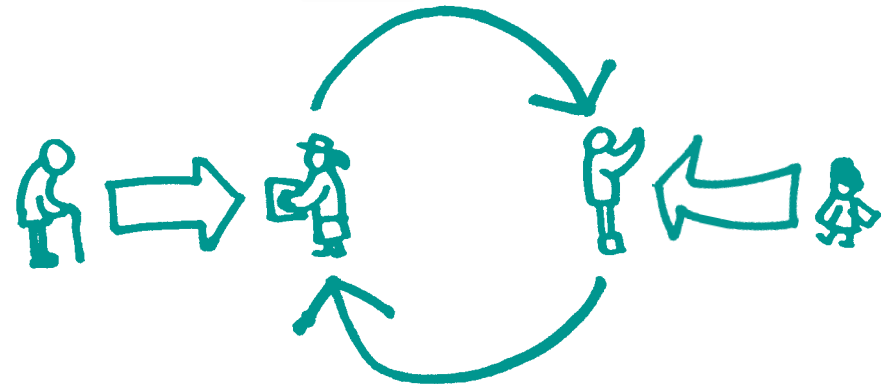


The first meeting of the task force was held January 17, 2013. Over the next couple of months, members broke into groups to generate ideas in three key areas:

**1.** *Improving civic government-to-resident and resident-to-civic government engagement.*



**2.** *Improving neighbour-to-neighbour relationships and engagement.*



**3.** *Communicating and engaging the community in the work of the Task Force.*





## Is this the final report? No!

Like other Mayor's task forces before it, the Engaged City Task Force first concentrated on ideas that could be achieved in the short term — what have been dubbed 'Quick Starts'.

This first report is a short list of those recommendations we feel could be accomplished by the City within a six month time frame.

The Task Force will develop a final report, with a longer list of short and long-term recommendations, by the end of July. Over the coming weeks, we will be looking for ways to invite more people into the discussion of ideas.

# QUICK



# STARTS

(6 MONTH TIME FRAME)

The Quick Starts are broken down into four categories:

**1.** Engagement at a Neighbourhood Level

**2.** Improve Civic Education

**3.** Improve the Development Process

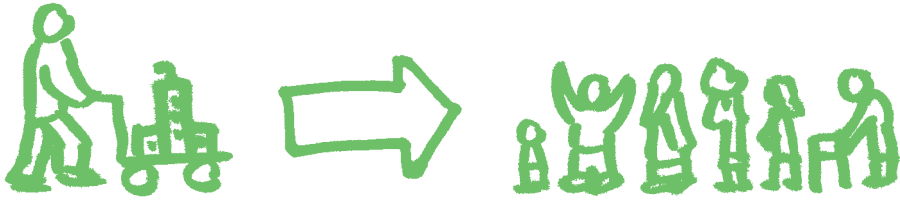
**4.** Social Media for Civic Engagement

QUICK ⚡ STARTS

**1.**  
Engagement at a Neighbourhood Level



## **Bring City Hall to the Community**



Many people are unable to access City Hall to use the services they want during the hours it is open, due to work or travel constraints. The City should develop a pilot program for a 'mini-City Hall' to have key city services available at select times in neighbourhoods, starting with those poorly served by transit access to City Hall. A mobile kiosk that visits different neighbourhoods could provide basic services that people need from City Hall, such as getting a new blue bin, paying a parking ticket, or registering to vote.

## **Declare a City-wide Neighbourhood Block Party Day**



The underlying theme of a Neighbourhood Block Party Day should be to empower neighbourhoods to engage neighbours with one another. The City should build on the success and demand for Car Free Days in Vancouver by declaring a Neighbourhood Block Party Day, creating economies of scale for block parties to plan, access city services, and build public awareness. The Block Party Day should seek to go beyond just single-family neighbourhoods to areas with high-density rental and strata buildings, the residents of which were identified in research from the Vancouver Foundation as being the most likely to cite feeling isolated from their local community.

## **Neighbourhood Councillor Liaisons**



The city-wide election process prevents residents from formally having an identified go-to councillor for issues in their neighbourhood. The City should reinvigorate the Council liaison positions by requiring each councillor to represent specific neighbourhoods in Vancouver, and working with local organizations to hold one public event in their designated neighbourhoods per year, with a focus on enhancing knowledge of city services and processes, and connecting people to City Hall. There may be an opportunity for these liaisons to work through the rotating mini-City Halls to create regular engagement with a particular neighbourhood.

## **Participatory Budgeting for Neighbourhoods**



Other cities in North America, such as New York and Chicago, are moving towards mechanisms for residents to determine how money is spent in their neighbourhood. The City should set aside money in its capital budget for neighbourhood infrastructure to pilot a participatory budgeting program in select neighbourhoods. This could be a great way to engage people who do not normally get involved in city initiatives. Winning projects could be used for local priorities like park enhancements, new playground equipment, amenities for seniors, street upgrades or new green space.



Inspiring Leadership

# PBNYC

In 2011, four New York City Council Members launched a participatory budget process – PBNYC – to let residents allocate part of their capital discretionary funds. This year, eight councillors are taking part, each putting up \$1 million in funds. Residents can submit ideas on projects to invest in, which will appear on a ballot open to district residents age 16 and older. The process starts with neighbourhood assemblies in the fall, who identify community needs and select delegates. Over the winter, the delegates meet to develop proposals, and then share them with the community through project expos to solicit feedback. The projects are revised and then put to a community vote in the spring.

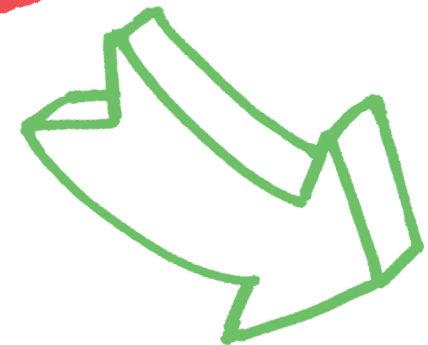
The PBNYC program engages a wide variety of resident groups, with over 20 represented on a city-wide steering committee that includes elected officials. Groups include the New York Immigration Coalition, New Yorkers for Parks, and the Pratt Center for Community Development, ensuring a diversity of viewpoints in the process.



## QUICK ⚡ STARTS

# 2.

## Improve Civic Education



## Open the Doors to City Hall



City Hall is the people's building, and the City should hold opportunities for the public to visit different floors, explore different departments, and visit offices that they cannot normally access. An "Open Door" day in Vancouver could also include key pieces of city infrastructure such as the Southeast False Creek Neighbourhood Energy Utility, the Manitoba Works Yard, or police and fire facilities, to build awareness about the services people receive for their tax dollars. Open Door day should be free to the public and provide opportunities for venues in different neighbourhoods throughout Vancouver, for people of all ages to tour, ask questions, and gain a new understanding of how the city works. Efforts should be made to present some tours in languages other than English.

## Make it Easy to Register to Vote



Voter turnout is low in Vancouver, with just 35% of eligible voters casting a ballot in 2011. In the 1960s, 70% of first-time young voters in Canada would vote in the first election they were eligible in. By 2004, this was down to 30%. We need to do better. The City should be doing everything it can to make it simple and easy to register and be informed. A permanent online voter registration and elections page should be available at all times on the City's website, not just in the lead-up to an election. People who register to vote in advance are much more likely to cast a vote than those who don't.

The webpage should include an opportunity to register online to vote, as well as information in different languages on how to do so by phone or email, timelines and requirements for registering to run for elected office, and details on what is needed to vote in terms of identification.

## City Hall 101



Many city processes are confusing and opaque to members of the public. The City should provide information in an easy-to-read, easily accessible format on the website to explain the different ways the public can interact with the city, as well as explain specific programs and policies. Budget development, city service responsibilities, rezonings – all of these should be explained in a standing section on the City website.

Graphics and animations should be used to convey complicated information, such as the development process, and tap into the wealth of artistic and design talent in Vancouver to collaborate on new ways to convey basic civic information to people who want it.

## City Hall Storytelling



Storytelling is a powerful way to engage people in discussions about how to improve their community, and can be effective in bringing together a diverse group of people. How many people in the public know the work by city staff that takes place behind the scenes? An event such as *Rain City Chronicles* would provide opportunities to hear personal stories about City Hall from staff, residents, business owners and others. This would foster better awareness about how the City operates. The event could also include residents, business owners and others who have stories to tell about their interactions with City Hall.

Inspiring Leadership

# Doors Open

*Doors Open* is a successful concept used in cities around the world, and has been growing in popularity in Canada. The City of Calgary hosted *Doors Open YYC – DO YYC NAKED* from September 29 to 30, 2012. 35 sites participated, with the challenge to provide more than just free access, but a behind-the-scenes look at how some of the most popular and well-known venues operate, giving people the chance to not just look, but experience.

*DO YYC NAKED* said:

*“Expect to see the heart of Calgary from the 1900s wrapped up in the Calgary of today. Expect to experience Calgary dance, music and theatre from the stage, not the seats. Expect to go behind the scenes in high-profile sports venues. Expect to learn the secrets and mechanics of how our city works. Expect to have access to private archives and collections. Expect to see sides of Calgary no one has seen before.”*



## QUICK ⚡ STARTS

3.

Improve the  
Development  
Process



## Earlier Public Involvement in Major Rezoning Proposals



The City should request that developers who seek a major rezoning of a property hold a community open house prior to any design proposals being put forward. This would prevent a scenario where expensive building design renderings are completed and made public at an open house, creating a perception that little will change if people provide comments or concerns. These open houses should be held in the neighbourhood where the development would take place, and provide an opportunity for the developer to inform and educate local residents on what is possible to build on the site, and for the community to express any opinions early on.

Providing an earlier opportunity for public input prior to a major rezoning will strengthen public trust in the planning process, and allow for proponents to gain a better understanding of community concerns before a first design is put forward.

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## Enhanced Notice of Planning Changes



Providing an adequate period of time for the public to be notified of planning and development items on Council agendas is an important way to build greater understanding of public policy changes. Currently, council reports are posted 5 to 6 days in advance of meetings. The City should aim to increase this time, from a week and a half to two weeks. With more time to absorb the reports coming forward, there is a better opportunity for dialogue, feedback, and avoidance of misunderstanding, as well as bolstering the public hearing process, which already provides extensive time and notification for citizen feedback.

The Task Force recognizes that while some reports are straight forward and would not face barriers to being posted more than 5 to 6 days in advance, reports that require decisions within a certain timeframe may not be able to achieve the target.

## Rethink Public Signs



It is time the City of Vancouver brought public signage into the 21st century. Too many of the notification signs, particularly related to planning and development, are written in outdated, technical language that makes it difficult for people to understand. These signs use small fonts, lack colour, and seem to encourage people to ignore them, rather than to read and be informed by them.

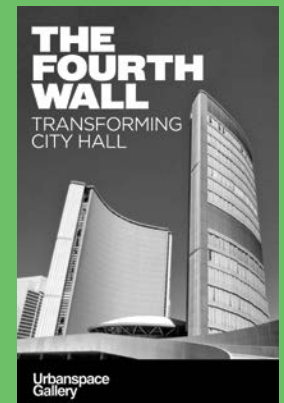
The City should engage the professional design community in a redesign contest for its development notification materials. The redesign contest should seek proposals for how City signs can be engaging and visually appealing when informing the public about development proposals.

Inspiring Leadership

# The 4th Wall

In 2011, Toronto's Urbanspace Gallery commissioned Dave Meslin, a local public space activist, to develop an exhibit on how to create a culture of local citizen engagement. The result was *The Fourth Wall*; 36 recommendations for how the City of Toronto can improve civic engagement, spanning electoral reform to supporting neighbourhood groups.

The first recommendation – *Reaching Out* – asked the question *'could the city do a better job of sharing information and communicating with citizens?'* The answer was a proposal to redesign public notification signs, resulting in posters that were colourful, creative, and simple to understand.

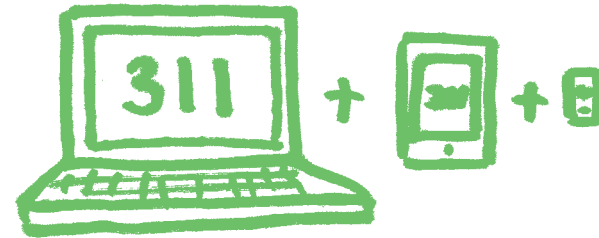


QUICK ⚡ STARTS



# 4. Social Media for Civic Engagement

## **Bring 3-1-1 Online**



The City's information telephone number 3-1-1 is increasingly used by Vancouverites to provide feedback and seek info from City Hall. Providing an online 3-1-1 function, such as through Twitter, would enable it to reach a broader range of people, particularly a younger demographic who might be less likely to call but have no problem tweeting a quick question.



## **Crowdsourced Venue List**



Have you ever wanted to host an event in your neighbourhood, but had no idea what venues were available to hold it in? Access to community venues is often restricted by a lack of knowledge of what exists, and one of the first and sometimes most difficult steps in bringing people together is finding a place to do it. This recommendation aims to support local residents in their efforts to organize community activities and events. A central list of venues that is created and updated online by community members is a way to support community-driven activities by providing reliable and easy-to-access information about the places in the city where people can come together.

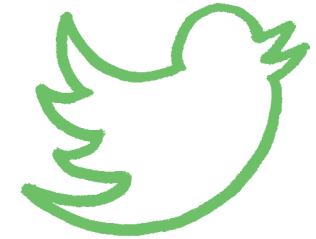


## Create and Promote an Engaged City Listserv



Currently, if you want to find out all of the different ways to get involved with the City, you need to keep tabs on a number of different departments: the City's Twitter feed, the Greenest City Facebook page, the Marpole community plan Twitter feed, or the Cultural Services newsletter, for example. The City should start an Engaged City Listserv to ensure that citizens who want to stay up to date on city events involving engagement, such as open houses and info sessions, receive the information regularly, and in one place, by email.

## Create and Promote an Engaged City Twitter Handle



Soliciting feedback from the public will be important for the process of developing the final report from the Task Force. The Task Force looked at many ways to engage people on social media, and concluded that a 'keep it simple' approach was best for effective engagement. Launching an Engaged City Twitter handle for people to tweet ideas and feedback will be a simple way to crowdsource ideas for the final report, and build up an online community that can then be continued by City staff once the Task Force's work is complete.

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## Create and Promote an Online Engagement Panel



The City should take advantage of innovative new online engagement tools and launch an open, online community panel that enables citizens to engage regularly with the City to provide feedback on civic issues. Using interactive survey and dialogue tools to collect feedback, this panel – with membership in the thousands – would provide a new avenue for citizen input that builds on existing structures for engagement. The online panel would allow for more in-depth feedback and the ability to ensure that responses are demographically representative of Vancouver.

*Inspiring Leadership*

## @NYCMayorsoffice

In October 2012, Hurricane Sandy devastated the eastern coast of the United States, leaving 7.5 million people without power over a two day period and \$30 billion in property damage. Social media proved to be a key component of how the City of New York communicated during the emergency, with New York Mayor Mike Bloomberg's office at the forefront of online engagement.

The City quickly published information on up-to-the minute flood predictions, as well as locations of emergency shelters and food distribution centres to its open data portal, enabling developers and designers to build emergency maps and applications. The City's main twitter channel, @NYCMayorsoffice, quickly became the go-to source for real time information, and in combination with a partnership with Twitter, which donated thousands of dollars worth of sponsored tweets, reached over a million more users and more than doubled its follower count over several days. The City sent more than 2,000 tweets and responded to over 300 questions during the Hurricane, and published news releases on Facebook and Tumblr in easy-to-read formats to reach an even larger audience during a natural disaster, keeping them informed on what the City was doing to respond.

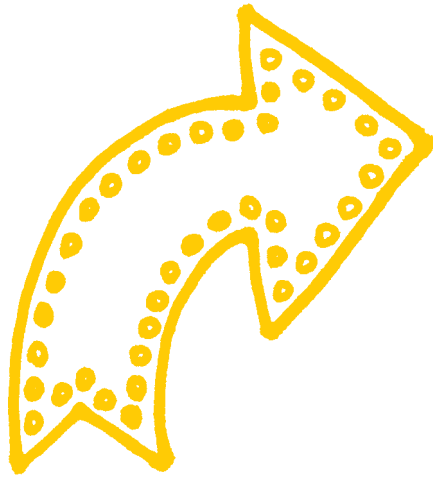


# CONCLUSION

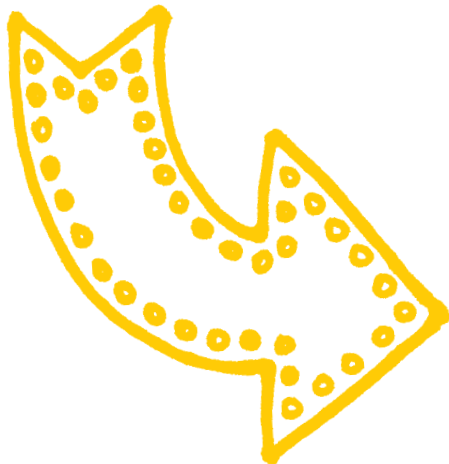


Our hope is that these Quick Start recommendations will enable the City to move quickly on improving civic engagement in Vancouver. There are simple, tangible steps the City can take to enhance public consultation, improve the effectiveness of civic communications, and foster collaboration and connection within neighbourhoods.

To be clear, improving civic engagement is not something that will happen quickly, and there is no magic solution. These recommendations are just a first step. We look forward to engaging the broader public in the weeks ahead as we work to create a final report that will provide a roadmap for enhancing civic engagement in Vancouver for the years to come.



# SUMMARY OF QUICK START RECOMMENDATIONS



## *Engagement at a Neighbourhood Level*

1. Bring City Hall to the Community
2. Participatory Budgeting for Neighbourhoods
3. Declare a City-wide Neighbourhood Block Party Day
4. Neighbourhood Councillor Liaisons

## *Improve Civic Education*

5. Open the Doors to City Hall
6. City Hall 101
7. Make it Easy to Register to Vote
8. City Hall Storytelling

## *Improve the Development Process*

9. Earlier Public Involvement in Major Rezoning Proposals
10. Enhanced Notice of Planning Changes
11. Rethink Public Signs and Notices

## *Social Media for Civic Engagement*

12. Bring 3-1-1 Online
13. Crowdsourced Venue List
14. Create and Promote an Engaged City Listserv
15. Create and Promote an Online Engagement Panel
16. Create and Promote an Engaged City Twitter Handle



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*May 2013*

**Vancouver Mayor's Engaged City Task Force**  
Design by Marten Sims

