BUILDING DIALOGUES: Tenant Participation in Toronto Community Housing Corporation Community Governance

Executive Summary

Marc Piccinato

July 2009.

Based upon a major research paper submitted in fulfillment of the Master in Environmental Studies degree, York University, Toronto, Ontario, April 2, 2009.
Introduction

This paper examines the current and future roles of TCHC in the development of local governance in tenant communities, considering the evolution of the TCHC tenant engagement structure as an organizational strategy and part of a perpetual change process. The organizational perception of and relationship with tenants is progressing towards the recognition of tenants as citizens rather than merely recipients or clients, with the implication that this understanding has motivated TCHC to confer governance responsibilities onto their tenant communities. It is argued here that tenants have both a need and a right to participate in the decision-making that affects their living environment, to contribute to better addressing complex community problems such as resident socio-economic marginalization or inadequate neighbourhood services and infrastructure. It may be necessary for tenant engagement in TCHC community management to expand in breadth and depth, in order to realize desired outcomes in tenant communities. This research paper makes the case for a transition in the strategic focus of TCHC from processes predicated on developing representative tenant leadership in local management to the inclusion of tenants in deliberative dialogue as a methodology for increasing tenant participation in the governance of TCHC communities, and consequently enlarging tenant civic engagement.

The general objective of this research was to determine whether deliberative dialogue methods might be feasible and mutually beneficial for tenants, their communities, and the housing provider, and how they may improve tenant participation in community-building, self-governance, and civic social networks. The present and future roles of TCHC in community
management practices as a facilitator, coordinator and leader are outlined to highlight the importance of organizational guidance in shaping the nature of tenant engagement, and thus their potential influence in the promotion and support of deliberative dialogue for tenant participation processes. A combination of qualitative primary research in addition to research of organizational literature, writings on comparable models, and examination of theoretical discourses, is employed to establish the relevance and merits of deliberative dialogue in the context of TCHC tenant communities. The research has been enriched by semi-structured interviews conducted with TCHC head office staff and community-based frontline staff as well as tenants. The overarching assertion is that deliberative dialogue processes can be established within TCHC structures, to engage tenants in addressing complex issues of concern to residents and the housing provider, in a spirit consistent with organizational strategic goals and values.

**Overview of Major Research Paper Contents**

**Section One** sketches the context in which Toronto Community Housing operates and strives to manage their corporately mandated responsibilities towards their shareholder the City of Toronto, and their tenant clientele. As a result of structural changes to the administration of non-profit housing and the provision of governmental support relative to need, TCHC has adapted a strategy of formalizing mechanisms for tenant participation in budgetary decisions and daily housing operations management.

**Section Two** outlines deliberative democratic theory as a basis for supporting participatory governance in TCHC communities. In their optimal forms deliberative dialogue processes have attributes that are ideal for tenant engagement in the TPS, as a deeper form of communication
between participants than discussion or debate, incorporating a reflective element that implies individual and group learning. This process can potentially resolve group conflicts and bridge differences, arriving at consensus, common ground or acceptable solutions. It is a strength of dialogue and deliberation processes is that although they require a support structure that includes facilitators, the different forms are adaptable to fit the particular context and needs. Co-governance forms, such as participatory budgeting, are distinguished as an application of deliberation towards ongoing processes of citizen participation in institutional decision-making. The meaning of social citizenship is also considered in order to conceptualize tenant deliberative dialogue as an active participatory process that encompasses both rights and responsibilities for members of a civic community.

Section Three explores how tenant participation in community governance can provide individual and collective benefits that empower the participants and increase their sense of efficacy. The current Tenant Participation System has developed tenant leadership in community governance through the CHU Tenant Councils, and Tenant Representatives have become active citizens in their communities while benefiting from opportunities for social learning. However, many tenants are not engaged with TCHC activities, and it is no longer sufficient for the purposes of realizing TCHC organizational goals to focus participatory governance opportunities solely upon a small number of tenant leaders. To build the capacities of a greater proportion of tenants, and increase participation in local community governance to better represent the diverse TCHC population, group processes such as deliberative decision-making can offer mechanisms for empowerment that not only generate instrumental process benefits, but are also transformative experiences.
Section Four examines the development of co-operative relationships and trust between tenants and TCHC in governance practices, and considers how deliberative dialogue might be introduced into the Tenant Participation System. The current TPS is not explicitly committed to facilitating and encouraging deliberative practices, but through a shift in the focus of tenant engagement strategies to develop deliberative group methods in concert with the organizational change process, it is possible to increase and enlarge community dialogues.

Section Five explores the potential of tenant deliberative governance to flourish through an alignment with social movements, community stakeholder partnerships, and concerted neighbourhood-wide development efforts including revitalization. This final section speculates on the possible influence of neighbourhood and municipal networks built upon tenant civic engagement, such as greater citizen participation in municipal governance, and the inherent possibilities in deliberative democracy for generating new pathways for tenants and other citizens to effect political and social change.

Summary of Key Findings

I. Although it is the TCHC organizational intention to develop tenant leaders and engaged communities, some staff recognize that leadership has been built without a widespread inclusion of tenants in community planning, as indicated by the 2006 Tenant Survey that found that only 15% of respondents had participated in the TPS. TCHC management staff commented that they wanted to expand the range of tenant participation options, and distinguished between the involvement of Tenant Reps in governance, and the need for broader
and more inclusive engagement opportunities. The 2008 Tenant Engagement Consultations and the creation of a Manager of Community Engagement position in TCHC are signs of movement on this desire to enlarge tenant engagement practices.

II. The small number of tenants actively involved in the TPS governance processes can experience social learning, and community-based deliberative dialogues could provide additional opportunities for social learning accessible to a larger number of tenants.

III. In general, forums for public dialogue are vital to community-building because they facilitate conversations to identify and address issues of concern or conflict, and seek common ground. Similarly, group dialogues within the TPS would allow tenants to develop familiarity and trust with each other, and become involved in seeking to resolve local concerns as a community.

IV. Some tenants seem concerned about the concentration of power and a monopolization of engagement by Tenant Reps, and apparently there are Tenant Reps who use their position for personal power rather than representing the needs of their tenant community.

V. One means to improve awareness of TCHC community improvement efforts and build personal trust between staff and tenants might be to involve more tenants in participatory processes that nurture co-operative communication between tenants and frontline staff, as well as between engaged tenants and new participants.
VI. Through its literature, practices and staff feedback, it is evident that TCHC aspires to be a social housing *learning organization* that supports tenant participation through the treatment of tenants as communities of citizens rather than individual consumers, where communications and governance approaches are structured to engage tenants in collective consultation and dialogue intended to empower participants, so that the organization may learn from their tenants.

VII. There is an organizational inclination to form committees and working groups to involve tenants in addressing portfolio-wide issues as illustrated by the decision following the 2008 engagement consultations to create issue-based committees to convene interested tenant leaders. These may be efficient action-oriented bodies, but they do not explicitly invite wider participation nor prioritize dialogue and deliberative values over traditional bureaucratic procedures.

VIII. While TCHC may be working to develop a participatory culture, because it is not clear that deliberation is consistently practiced in TPS related meetings and group discussions, including the Allocation Day event, there is little evidence of a deliberative culture. Because tenants will not naturally gravitate towards deliberative dialogue over other modes of discussion or debate, TCHC must be process advocates for rules and principles of formal deliberative dialogue procedures, encouraging and enforcing the practice where desired.

IX. The question for TCHC to address is to what degree deliberative dialogue can and should be integrated into the TPS and whether some current decision-making processes should be
converted to more deliberative forms, or new deliberative opportunities added to the TPS structure.

X. Some TCHC staff have expressed an interest in and awareness of deliberative models of participation. In considering which concerns are best served by deliberative practices, it should be recognized that deliberative dialogues could allow for an expansion in the scope and complexity of issues to be explored, and provide an opportunity for tenants to reach a deeper and shared understanding of a subject, to seek more innovative solutions. Deliberative discussions could also provide an inclusive process for diverse communities of people to learn from each other and reach value-based decisions together.

XI. One deliberative option is the thematic plenary, such as the model introduced into the participatory budget in Porto Alegre, a format that is open to greater participation and dialogue than a committee format. A deliberative plenary centred upon discussion of a particular theme could involve both an open forum, and smaller group dialogues.

XII. Another possibility for deliberative dialogues is the establishment of study circles to explore a particular issue in depth, a model already introduced into TCHC practice through a 2007 TCHC pilot program in three CHUs. Study circles are a method of small group meetings, ideally composed of participants from diverse backgrounds and experiences, that employ dialogue and then deliberation with the aid of a facilitator and informational discussion
Separate study circles can operate simultaneously across a community (or portfolio-wide for that matter), and convene together at certain points to share their progress.

XIII. One of the organizational intentions for the TPS is to increase tenant civic engagement outside their building into the larger neighbourhood, and deliberative forums are a means to extend participatory governance involving tenants beyond just TCHC budgetary concerns, a logistical possibility with the collaboration of other community partners and stakeholders.

XIV. Partnerships with other community organizations and groups offer a means for TCHC to further develop deliberative dialogue within neighbourhoods, without the necessity of assuming sole ‘ownership’ over issues that extend beyond their tenant communities. Community partners can provide logistical support, information for participants, and even leverage their connections with particular demographic groups to engage new participants.

XV. There is an evident tenant appetite for seeking out opportunities for greater political participation. A case in point is the Listening to Toronto consultations for the 2004 and 2005 City of Toronto municipal budgets. Because TCHC tenants had been practicing and learning a form of participatory budgeting in their CHUs for a few years prior to the Listening to Toronto exercises, they had not only acquired a familiarity with the process and the necessary civic skills, but many had a ready interest and enthusiasm for municipal participatory budgeting. In public forums such as Listening to Toronto their experience and skills as veterans of participatory budgeting ensure they can actively contribute to the outcome, voicing their

---

perspectives and demonstrating their proficiency to other participants from beyond TCHC communities.

Conclusions

A primary purpose of this paper is to illustrate the fledgling change in TCHC organization, culture and practice that suggests a possible transition in strategies of tenant engagement. While the organization retains control over the parameters of tenant decision-making in the TPS, the increase in tenant agency and active participation in TCHC governance can have the effect of enlarging the scope of tenant involvement in civil society. Deliberation is not the sole means to effect tenant empowerment, but in practice such participation can be an important tactic for social change in conjunction with activism and political networking. This paper is not a technical blueprint for the implementation of successful and sustainable deliberative dialogue practices in TCHC communities. Rather, it develops the rationale for such change as a part of the evolution of the Tenant Participation System. If there were wider opportunities for tenant participation in forums of deliberative dialogue, the potential benefits to individuals, their communities, the TCHC, and the larger civic sphere are considerable. From the organizational perspective, greater tenant inclusion and engagement in TCHC community management can increase corporate accountability to tenants, improve communications and cooperation within tenant communities and between tenants and TCHC staff, and advance goals and values of the TCHC mandate such as the achievement of healthy, safe, resilient, equitable and inclusive communities.