City planning

The City of Winnipeg's strategic plans focus on good governance, environmental resilience, community well-being, and equity. While these goals have the potential to improve quality of life in the city, they are often undermined by decisions that do not acknowledge the long-term costs of different types of development and limited revenue sources. There is also eroding public trust in local government, which is exacerbated by limited opportunities for meaningful public participation. The Alternative Municipal Budget proposes several strategies aimed at addressing these issues, including:

- Making planning decisions based on the full costs of development
- Increasing trust and transparency through participatory budgeting
- Using taxation strategies to support policy goals

These strategies are designed to (1) ensure that financial resources and benefits align with the vision set out in planning documents, (2) increase transparency and fairness in how communities participate in planning processes, and (3) develop more sustainable and equitable revenue sources.

Make planning decisions based on the full costs of development

While the City's official plan (*OurWinnipeg 2045*) and strategic plans are guided by principles of environmental and financial sustainability,

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this is often at odds with the types of development and infrastructure investments that are permitted. A lack of consistency between capital improvement plans and official plans is seen as an endemic problem, requiring immediate attention.[1] While low-density growth may temporarily add to the City's tax rolls, the long-term costs are not being fully accounted for. The implications can be significant, with the need for new schools, recreation, and emergency services, while existing facilities suffer from deferred maintenance and underutilization. The impact on infrastructure is even clearer. While the immediate costs of infrastructure expansions are budgeted for, the long-term operating and maintenance costs are not.

Critical safety issues can come from not accounting for the long-term maintenance and replacement costs for the development of new infrastructure. An independent review of the disastrous 2024 Bearspaw watermain breaks in Calgary found that the rapid pace of low-density growth stretched capacity and exacerbated infrastructure issues.[2] The long-term costs of maintenance and replacement are also apparent in Winnipeg, such as with the emergency closure of key infrastructure like the Arlington Bridge due to critical safety issues. Other public facilities also suffer from the impacts of deferred maintenance, leading to the closure of pools, arenas, and other recreational facilities. More than 20 years ago, the City noted the high costs of deferred maintenance and argued that new projects should be budgeted on a life-cycle basis — not just the initial cost of the project.[3]

As argued by others, before building new infrastructure, municipalities must "clearly identify how future generations will afford to maintain it."[4] Given the long-term financial, safety, and maintenance issues, it is crucial that the City account for the full life-cycle costs of different types of development. At the minimum, approval of new development should account for the operating, maintenance, and replacement costs of infrastructure and public facilities over the full life cycle of these facilities.

Increase trust and transparency through participatory budgeting

Increasingly, there is distrust of government agencies and the work that they do, including for planning strategies that aim to tackle critical issues like reducing car dependence and addressing climate change. Public trust is essential to good governance and is often related to how people engage with government agencies. Recent surveys have found the greatest differences in levels of trust are related to whether people feel that the political system allows them to have a say.[5] In Winnipeg, participation is limited to municipal elections, which have very low turnout, or through legally-mandated consultation processes that offer little transparency in how decisions are made.

One strategy to address this is by allowing more direct control over decision-making, such as through participatory budgeting. In this model, community members brainstorm ideas for how money should be spent and vote on preferred options, which are then implemented by the municipality.[6] Critically, participatory budgeting has the potential for direct participation in decisions that affect them.[7] By allowing direct and meaningful control over decision-making, participatory budgeting has the potential to strengthen relationships between governments and communities, and can lead to more transparency and greater trust in governments.[8] Participatory budgeting processes also allow for democratic participation beyond elections, and can increase who participates in these processes.[9] While there may be challenges in ensuring diverse and inclusive involvement, the potential for participatory budgeting to allow citizens more control over decisions and restore trust in government agencies makes it an ideal strategy for the City of Winnipeg.[10]

Since being developed in Brazil, participatory budgeting programs have been successfully implemented in many cities worldwide and in Canada. Many cities, including Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and Boston have used participatory budget processes to allocate millions of dollars to community-designed projects. Since 2002, Toronto Community Housing, the largest social housing provider in Canada, has allocated a portion of its capital budget for community-identified projects through a participatory process.[11] While the nature of these programs vary, when these processes are designed to ensure equity, ensure accessibility, and give control over significant budgets they can improve government trust and transparency.[12]

Use taxation strategies to support policy goals

Taxes and fees are used to raise revenue but can also be used to either encourage desirable economic outcomes (such as encouraging investment) and reduce undesirable ones (such as greenhouse gas emissions or pollutants).[13] The City of Winnipeg has waived fees or charges to encourage some types of development, such as to encourage development downtown.[14] Yet, there are many fiscal strategies that can both reduce unwanted harms and raise revenue. Eco-fiscal tools — in the form of taxes, fees or regulatory charges, can be used by municipalities to achieve environmental goals, and are particularly appropriate when the impacts are local, such as traffic congestion, canopy cover, soil pollution, and fine particle emissions.[15] In Canada, Québec municipalities are the leader in applying eco-fiscal tools, including charges for parking spaces, vacant commercial space, and canopy loss. In addition to raising revenue, charges such as these can be successful in changing behaviours, such as reducing waste through volume-based pricing or reductions in commercial parking spaces through parking taxes (see Fiscal chapter for more info on how AMB revenue align with eco-fiscal policy goals).[16] Revenue from these types of charges should be used to address related issues. For example, in Montréal, vehicle registration charges are dedicated exclusively to public transportation and have grown from $59 to $150 to keep pace with transit investments.[17]

While there are many types of taxes and charges to improve environmental outcomes and raise revenue, those that have low administration costs, are transparent in application, and can be fairly applied should be prioritized. Vehicle registration taxes, which are common outside of North America and have been used effectively in Québec, are one tool that can provide revenue to help shift away from unsustainable travel patterns.[18] Implementing a similar vehicle registration tax in Winnipeg could provide a dedicated revenue source to support public transit and active transportation. A 2022 estimate of Manitoba vehicle registrations found 1,182,792 cars registered across the province, with 62 per cent (733,331) registered in Winnipeg.[19] At just $60 per car, a vehicle registration fee payed by Winnipeg car owners could raise $44 million per year for public and active transit. Implementing such a fee would require collaboration with Manitoba Public Insurance and the Province, however this would be a significant additional revenue source for public and active transportation.

Actions

- **The AMB will** allocate funds to analyze the full cost of different development patterns, including long-term operating, maintenance and replacement costs.
  - Staff to assess long-term costs of existing capital plans and consistency with strategic plans (1 FTE): $105,000
  - Staff to examine costs of different development patterns (1 FTE): $105,000
- **The AMB will** allocate funds for community-identified projects through a participatory budgeting process:
  - Budget allocated for participatory budget projects: $1,500,000 (100,000 amount per ward x 15)
  - Staff to administer program (1 FTE): $105,000

Notes

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