





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report was prepared by the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue's Renovate the Public Hearing Initiative (RPHI) to encompass the opinions shared during two in-person workshops and multiple virtual key informant interviews held in collaboration with hua foundation from October to December 2023. The purpose of these engagements was to collect input on participants' experience of attending a public hearing affecting Vancouver's Chinatown community. The majority of the participants spoke about their experience at the 105 Keefer public hearing in 2017.

This publication does not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Centre for Dialogue. Any works referring to this material should cite:

Renovate the Public Hearing Initiative. (2024). What We Heard Report: Voices of the Chinatown Community in Public Hearings & Engagement. Vancouver, Canada: Simon Fraser University Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue.

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We also acknowledge the x^wməθk^wəyəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw (Squamish), səlilwətat (Tsleil-Waututh), qicəy (Katzie), kwikwəðam (Kwikwetlem), Qayqayt, Kwantlen, Semiahmoo, and Tsawwassen peoples, on whose unceded traditional territories Simon Fraser University's campuses are located, as well as where Vancouver's Chinatown is situated. By acknowledging the historical and ongoing presence, displacement and dispossession of these Nations, we are reminded of the inherent relationship between land and the decisions we make regarding its use. We acknowledge that the process of enhancing land use decision making processes requires a collective effort and a commitment to respectful and equitable engagement.



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VOICES OF THE CHINATOWN COMMUNITY IN PUBLIC HEARINGS & ENGAGEMENT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents insights derived from a series of engagements held between October and December 2023, featuring two in-person workshops and multiple virtual key informant interviews conducted in collaboration with hua foundation and partners. The primary aim of these engagements was to gather input on participants' experiences attending a public hearing, including the 105 Keefer development, with a particular focus on their impact on Vancouver's Chinatown community. Through these interactions, our objective was to delve into the perceptions, challenges, and grassroots efforts within the community.

The report delves into several key themes that emerged from these engagements. Firstly, participants expressed feelings of anxiety and noted significant time commitments associated with participating in public hearings. They highlighted the formal setting as overwhelming and detailed the extensive preparation required for effective engagement. Additionally, participants showcased diverse engagement efforts, ranging from written correspondence to in-person attendance, emphasizing a desire for localized public hearings and community support.



INTRODUCTION

Accessibility emerged as a prominent concern, with participants advocating for materials presented in plain language and the provision of translation services. Despite expressing cynicism about the impact of their efforts on decision-makers, participants indicated a preference for in-person participation over remote options.

OF THE 50 COMMUNITY MEMBERS WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE ENGAGEMENTS...



- A majority of participants expressed that they felt anxious when approaching the public hearing.
- A majority of participants took more than 10 hours of time away from other responsibilities to participate in the public hearing – including time spent preparing notes to speak, time spent writing letters to council and signing petitions, time spent attending the public hearing itself and more.
- A majority of participants sent emails and letters, signed petitions, and attended rallies in addition to attending the public hearing in person.
- A majority of participants thought that public hearings should be physically conducted in affected communities. In other words, councillors should come to the people, not the other way around.
- A majority of participants said that seeking and finding a sense of community aided in their participating in the public hearing.
- A majority of participants felt that materials they used to prepare for the public hearing felt intentionally inaccessible and confusing to them.
- A majority of participants said that materials were only made more accessible
 by community newsletters that helped interpret the language used by the city.
- A majority of participants said they would like to receive materials in plain language.
- A majority of participants think that translation and interpretation should be provided by the city at public hearings, and that more time for speakers who require these services should be given.



- Many participants became more cynical of the public hearing process through attending multiple hearings.
- Many participants felt conflicted about whether or not their efforts affected the elected officials.
- Many participants said that they would participate in a public hearing again but only because it is the sole way they can participate.



 No participants thought that materials provided by the government were accessible.



• 5 people mentioned wanting to participate in public hearings virtually.

- 18 people spoke about the importance of participating in person—to hear each other's live reactions, have conversations with one another face to face, and feel the energy of the room. Even so, many of these folks may have said they would want to increase accessibility to others who cannot participate in person, but the data does not necessarily reflect this.
- 19 people did not feel as if their efforts (speaking or participating) at a public hearing affected the elected officials in front of them.
- 17 people also said that they would participate again but solely because it is the only way they can participate.

The collaboration between RPHI and hua foundation highlighted the significance of community partnerships in addressing complex issues surrounding public hearings and land use decision making processes in general. Through the workshops and interviews, valuable insights were revealed into the nuanced dynamics of public hearings, paving the way for strategies aimed at enhancing inclusivity and effectiveness in community engagement processes.

This report serves as a valuable resource for stakeholders seeking to establish more accessible and participatory platforms for civic dialogue and decision-making, offering actionable insights derived from firsthand experiences and perspectives from members of the Vancouver Chinatown community.

BACKGROUND

THE RENOVATE THE PUBLIC HEARING INITIATIVE

In British Columbia, the current public hearing process for land-use decision making has faced significant criticism due to its lack of inclusivity and the various barriers it presents to meaningful participation. These barriers include, but are not limited to, challenges for individuals whose first language is not English, limited accessibility for those living with disabilities, and difficulties for individuals unable to arrange childcare or take time off work to attend hearings. As municipalities increasingly recognize the importance of community feedback and the impact of decision-making processes, there is a growing acknowledgment of the need to revisit and reform these processes to ensure they are truly accessible and conducive to constructive dialogue.

Enter the Renovate the Public Hearing Initiative (RPHI), a \$2.5 million initiative funded by the Canadian Mortgage & Housing Corporation and based out of Simon Fraser University's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue (the Centre). The Centre uses dialogue and engagement to facilitate transformative conversations and create real-world impact for society's most pressing challenges. RPHI, a project housed out of the Centre, seeks to reform the public hearing landscape in the province by piloting changes to existing requirements. This one-of-a-kind initiative aims to enhance equity, strengthen democratic culture, and improve municipal efficiencies by identifying evidence-based recommendations for revising public hearing requirements under the British Columbia Local Government Act.



HUA FOUNDATION

Recognizing the importance of community collaboration in driving meaningful change, RPHI has partnered with various stakeholders and community groups, including hua foundation to gain valuable community input. Hua foundation, a youth empowerment non-profit based in Vancouver's Chinatown, is deeply committed to addressing racial equity and civic engagement issues within the Asian diasporic community. Additional partners to this project included individual community organizers, Yarrow Intergenerational Society for Justice, an organization that supports youth and immigrant seniors in Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside, and Chinatown Today, a local publication that reflects the intercultural and intergenerational aspirations of Vancouver's Chinatown. All of these organizations were involved in community organizing around 2017's 105 Keefer development public hearing.

CONTEXT

105 KEEFER PUBLIC HEARING: THE REZONING PROPOSAL



The 105 Keefer Rezoning Application was a mixed-use development proposed in the neighbourhood of Vancouver's Chinatown. After several revisions since 2014, in response to feedback through public consultations and from advisory review groups, an application was submitted to the City of Vancouver in late 2016 that included plans for a 12-story building with commercial space on the ground floor, 25 senior social housing units on the second floor, and market residential units above.

The project proponents' rezoning rationale was that the project "responds to the community desire for seniors affordable housing, broader public benefits, and public realm improvements that will improve the urban landscape of Chinatown while reinforcing its rich cultural fabric." However, the project faced significant controversy and opposition from members of the community who raised concerns about its potential impact on Chinatown's cultural heritage and the displacement of long-standing residents and businesses. Critics argued that the development would contribute to gentrification and change the character of the neighborhood. There were also calls for more public benefits (e.g. more social housing units) than what was packaged as part

of the rezoning application. The proposal sparked heated debates and protests, highlighting broader issues related to urban development, class, community identity, and conservation of cultural heritage.

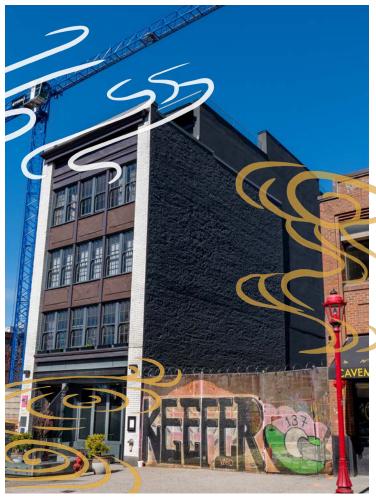
At the May 2nd, 2017 Regular Council meeting, the application was referred to the May 23rd, 2017 Public hearing. The public hearing ultimately spanned four days at council (May 23rd, May 25th, 26th, and 29th) with over 100 speakers, many of whom had never participated in a public hearing before. In the end, the rezoning proposal was rejected by the Vancouver City Council at the June 13th, 2017 Regular Council Meeting.

Today, community members still see the 2017

public hearing of the 105 Keefer Rezoning as a success and a testament to the powers of community organizing and engagement. In direct relation to the 105 Keefer Rezoning, RPHI's goal in collaborating with hua foundation was to understand the Chinatown community's experience of the public hearing process, the depth of bottom-up community engagement work that was tackled during the neighbourhood organizing, and the importance of meaningful public engagement from an equity-denied community specific focus.



BACKDROP OF THE CHINATOWN NEIGHBOURHOOD









105 KEEFER DEVELOPMENT PERMIT BOARD HEARING, BC SUPREME COURT DECISION, AND BEYOND

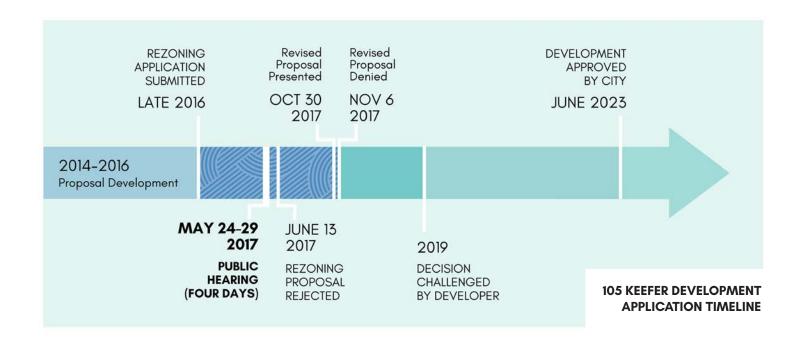
Two weeks after Vancouver City Council rejected the 105 Keefer rezoning application, the project proponent, Beedie Living, submitted a development permit application to the City of Vancouver. This revised proposal was for a nine-storey mixed-use building that adheres to existing zoning guidelines for the area. As it was not a rezoning, it did not go before City Council (and was not subject to a public hearing). The development proposal was presented to the City's Development Permit Board (DPB) on October 30, 2017 and was once again met with organized community opposition. While the DPB does not hold 'Public Hearings' it is notable that the public input portion of the meeting functions like a public hearing; where speakers are able to present their arguments to the board in support or against the project. At the meeting, the DPB heard arguments from both supporters and opponents of the project. At a reconvened meeting one week later, on November 6, 2017, the DPB denied Beedie Living's application. In response to the DPB's decision, Beedie Living filed an appeal to the City of Vancouver's Board of Variance. The Board of Variance found that they had no jurisdiction to consider such an appeal.

In 2019, Beedie Living sought recourse by challenging the City/DPB's decision by filing a petition in the B.C. Supreme Court. Beedie filed six arguments in a bid to ask the Court to direct the City of Vancouver Development Permit Board to reconsider the original development application decision. While the original petition was denied, an appeal by Beedie was successful and the

petition was heard by the Court. In the end, Beedies's petition was successful on the grounds that the City's DPB did not provide sufficient reasons for their decision to deny the application.

In June 2023, as ordered by the outcome of the court decision, the Development Permit Board reconsidered the development at 105 Keefer and approved it with conditions. While this decision was seen by many as a major loss and blow to the democratic process that went against the community-based organizing and the needs of many Chinatown community members, the initial rejection of the rezoning proposal by council during the development's public hearing reflected the depth of community opinions and highlighted the importance of public input in shaping urban development decisions.*







CHINATOWN CONNECTIONS

In British Columbia, when a development application is submitted, the public must be informed through various means. This includes posting notices on the municipality's website, publishing in local newspapers, and displaying notices near the proposed development site. For developments with potential impacts on neighboring properties or communities, direct mail notification is required. This involves identifying affected property owners and residents within a certain radius, preparing letters detailing the proposed development and its impacts, and mailing them out. Specific requirements vary between municipalities, but for the City of Vancouver, applicants are required to send out mail notifications to those within 100 metres of the development.

However, this process is imperfect when considering the breadth of community members who utilize an area such as Vancouver's Chinatown. While for example, businesses and residents nearby the 105 Keefer development may have been notified of its plan, this process fails to consider the array of community members who are engaged in the space but do not necessarily reside there. It also fails to accommodate those whose primary working language is not English. As much of the Chinatown community communicates in Chinese (spoken Mandarin, Cantonese, or other dialects; written Traditional and Simplified Chinese), notification ads sent in English could pose as a barrier to access.

We collaborated closely with hua foundation and additional partners, leveraging their expertise in community organizing, particularly within the Asian diaspora to better understand community members' experiences when it comes to engaging in land use decision making processes. Recognizing the need to ensure all voices were heard, we facilitated two workshops to engage the Chinese community in dialogue.

One workshop, conducted in Cantonese and Mandarin by staff from Yarrow Society, took place on October 28, 2023 and had 14 participants in attendance. The other, held in English, occurred on November 4th, 2023 and had 26 participants in attendance. These dialogues aimed to uncover any unique barriers faced by the community during the public hearing process and to gauge if they felt adequately represented and listened to. In addition to these events, key informant interviews were held amongst 10 participants and included people who had valuable opinions to share but could not attend either of the workshops.

Through these efforts, we sought to gain deeper insights into the challenges and efforts involved in grassroots organizing within the community, as well as hear recommendations for improvement of current processes.



ENGAGEMENT OVERVIEW:

2WORKSHOPS

14 COMMUNITY MEMBERS

- CANTONESE
- MANDARIN

26 COMMUNITY MEMBERS

ENGLISH



10 KEY INFORMANTS

WORKSHOPS



ABOVE (LEFT): ENGLISH WORKSHOP

ABOVE (RIGHT): CANTONESE & MANDARIN WORKSHOP



REPORT THEMES

In this report, we present findings from engagements with 50 community members regarding their experiences and perceptions of public hearings affecting Chinatown, including the 105 Keefer public hearing in 2017. The aim was to gather insights into various aspects of the public hearing process, including participation barriers, accessibility concerns, and the effectiveness of engagement efforts. Themes that emerged are outlined below.

ANXIETY & TIME COMMITMENT

A prevalent theme among participants was the experience of having anxiety when approaching public hearings. Many expressed feeling overwhelmed or intimidated by the formal setting and the prospect of speaking in front of officials. Additionally, the time commitment required for participation was a significant concern. Over half of the participants reported spending more than 10 hours away from their other responsibilities to prepare for and attend the public hearing.



"These spaces feel like they're not meant to be safe, especially for people like me who are taught to not question our parents, let alone authority."

-Joanna

"Security guards would come in intermittently to see that we were under control, and people were holding themselves from going to the bathroom etc. because they were anxious to leave and miss their name being called. People were afraid to leave the room because they didn't want to miss their chance to speak."

-Anonymous

"It feels like attending public hearings is a second job—following everything happening at city hall, being aware of the issues, listening to the media, being aware of provincial legislation—it takes up half my time all the time."

-Larry

ENGAGEMENT EFFORTS

Participants engaged in a variety of efforts to make their voices heard. This included sending emails, letters, and signing petitions, as well as attending rallies and participating in public hearings in person.



"Going in person is not an option because many of us don't know how to get there. Writing letters isn't possible because many of us aren't literate, or many of us haven't written in decades."

-Ms. Guan

"Public hearings by phone would work, but I can't do computers. If you called me and said you have 3 minutes to speak to this issue, I could do that."

-Ms. Guan

REPRESENTATION

There were calls for public hearings to be conducted in familiar, culturally safe, and community-oriented spaces to enhance accessibility and representation.



"It's better to do consultations when it's familiar and comfortable for the community. This should be embedded in the way people host events. It tilts power dynamics but it's important to talk about. Places that are more neutral—places people have already been to before, like community centres. City Hall is elite, a very different vibe. People go to City Hall to pay for tickets. It's not really a place to celebrate and be free and enjoy themselves, not a place of fun."

-Joanna

"The design of city council chambers reminds me of going to church. There are symbols of power and hierarchy—venerating and showing you who has the power in this situation."

-Anonymous

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

The role of community support emerged as a crucial factor in facilitating participation in public hearings. Participants highlighted the importance of feeling supported by their peers and community organizations. Community newsletters were particularly valued for their role in making materials more accessible and providing interpretation of complex language used by the city.



"The community organizers did a great job to see that speakers were guided in the preparation process by emailing us beforehand. It helped me structure my remarks to address things that the panel of councillors wanted to hear, so my words were heard and useful."

-Clare

"Policy decisions can often feel like they exist in a silo, but the actual everyday impact of these policies are not expressed and it's always up to people in the community who are familiar with these processes to interpret these things for the rest of us."

-Rachel Lau

"We need more funding for community organizations to support people's involvement in public engagements and political processes. We won't change the world overnight and the function organizations play is really important—a lot of people wouldn't be involved without their role in making it accessible."

—Joanna

"I have the privilege of a partner, a grandparent and a supportive work environment to speak and take resources to do this work but most people don't."

-Joanna

ACCESSIBILITY & LANGUAGE

Accessibility emerged as a significant concern, with participants finding materials prepared for public hearings to be intentionally inaccessible and confusing. There was a strong consensus among participants for the need for materials to be provided in plain language. Additionally, translation and interpretation services were identified as essential for ensuring accessibility for non-English speaking communities.



"There needs to be some sort of standard for access to information—it would be great to have a landing page per consultation, a suite of relevant documents that are downloadable with one click, and more clarity on what is at stake—for example, if this does pass, this will happen, if this doesn't pass, this will happen."

-Joanna

"Whenever I needed any information from the city, I had to rely on family members and the volunteers checking in with me, and I would just pick up the phone to reach them instead of anyone from the city."

-Ms. Kuang

"Emotions and services are divorced so often something like an "interpreter" for public hearings would help participants understand what's happening real time, ask how people feel about them, and offer emotional and process-based support to help them navigate these spaces."

-Anonymous

"I remember the other elders that went to the 2017 public hearing with me—I could barely write my own name and there were only English-speaking people listening to us. It felt like we could barely get anything across to them."

-Ms. Chan (嬌姐)

CULTURAL IDENTITY & HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE

Several participants reflected on the cultural significance of public hearings, particularly in relation to Chinatown's history and legacy of political activism.



"I might not have been conscious of it at the time, but to participate politically as a young Chinese Canadian—being a part of this legacy of political activism that's so characteristic of Chinatown—was really special. In my family, my parents never participated in this way."

-Angela Ho

"Questioning my cultural identity, unpacking race and feminism all came to a head when I entered Chinatown. Trying to understand what my place is in this—this is the driving question for a lot of diasporic people. Recognizing my privilege and positionality and speaking out for those who would be most impacted by 105 Keefer felt important."

-Clare

CYNICSM & IMPACT

Attending multiple public hearings led many participants to become more cynical about the effectiveness and fairness of the process. There was uncertainty about the impact of participants' efforts on elected officials, with many feeling disillusioned by what they perceived as a lack of responsiveness from decision-makers as well behind the scenes power dynamics.



"Public hearings happen too late in the process. Councillors dismiss our thoughts, see us only as citizens and not as experts, and have already made up their mind."

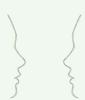
-Kelly

"When I went [to the public hearing], I went with a lot of hope, but afterward, I lost a lot of that feeling of hope in the process."

-Ms. Liang

DESIRE FOR IN-PERSON PARTICIPATION

While some participants expressed interest in Zoom participation for increased accessibility, a significant number emphasized the importance of in-person interaction at public hearings. They valued the opportunity to hear each other's cheers and boos, have face-to-face conversations, and feel the energy of the room.



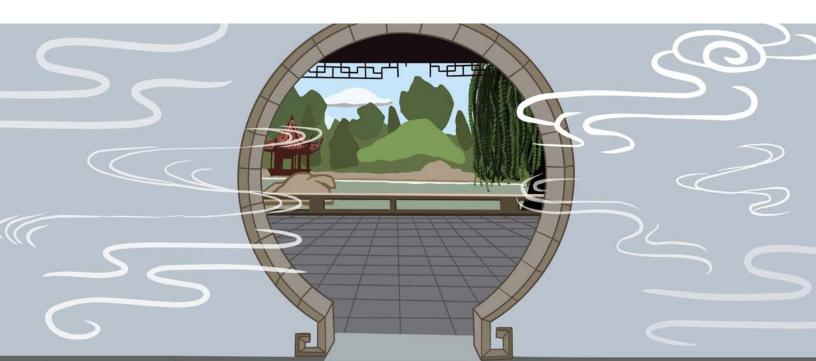
"Tuning in to a public hearing online is not the same—hearing cheering, booing, and having side conversations in person are important. It really helps you feel a sense of community."

-Anonymous

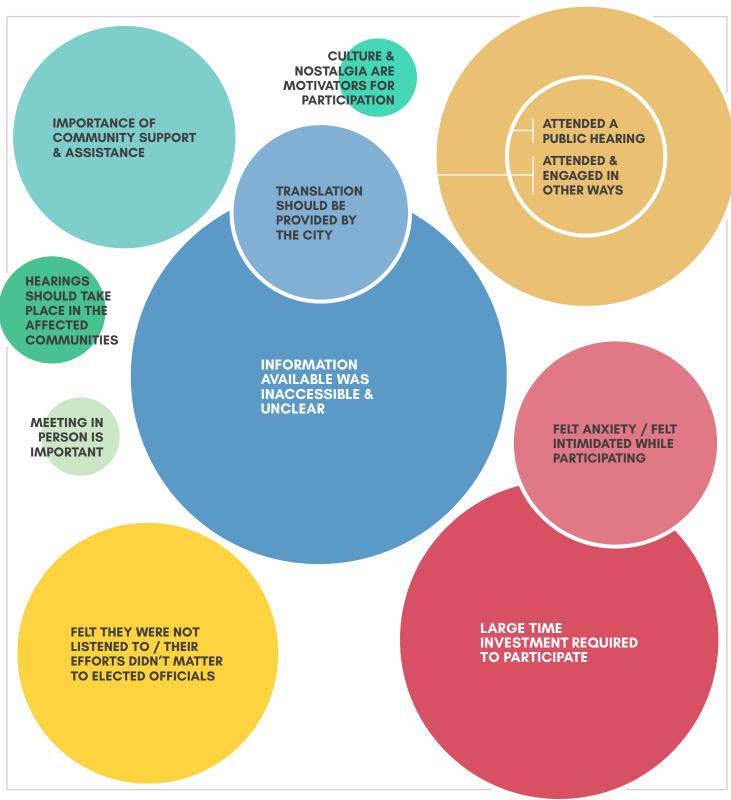
"People who have real power don't go to public hearings—they go behind the scenes. The people who go to public hearings are those who have no other option."

-Su-Anne

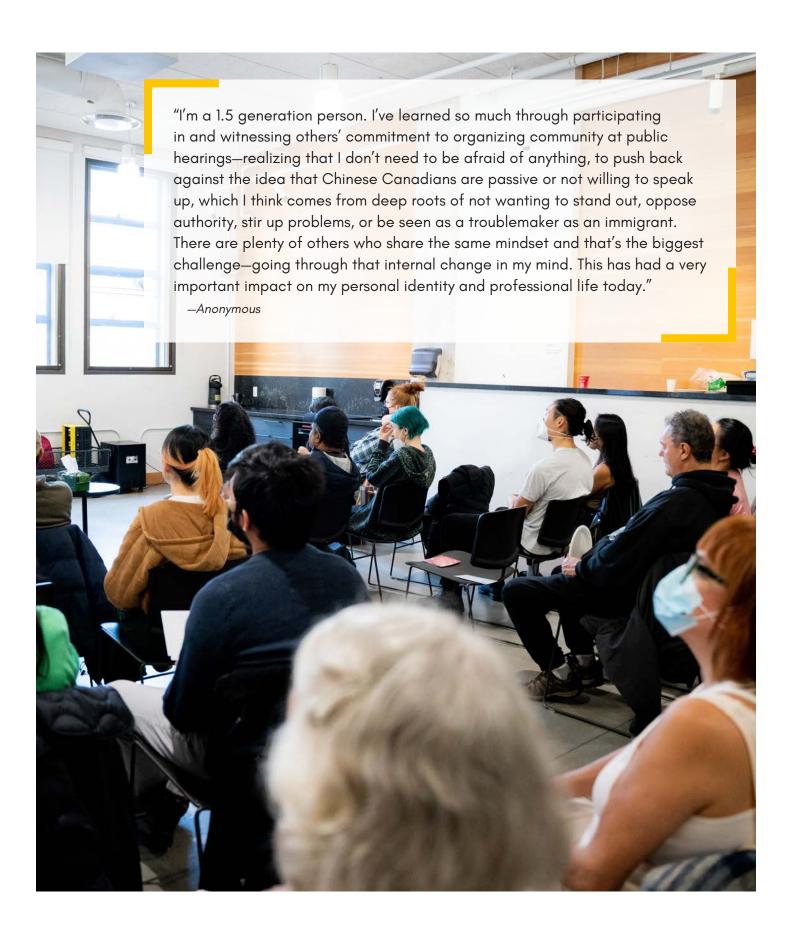
The findings of these engagements highlight the complex dynamics at play in public hearings. Anxiety, time commitment, accessibility, community support, and the desire for in-person interaction are key factors influencing participation. Addressing these concerns will be crucial for enhancing the inclusivity and effectiveness of public hearings in the future. This report provides valuable insights that can inform efforts to create more accessible and participatory processes for community engagement.



AGGREGATED THEMES



COMMENTS MADE BY PARTICIPANTS GROUPED INTO THEMES—SIZE REPRESENTS NUMBER OF TIMES EACH THEME WAS MENTIONED (UNPROMPTED BY INTERVIEWERS)



LIMITATIONS & REFLECTIONS



Limitations of our analysis must be considered when interpreting the themes, which offers a broad overview of participant sentiments across engagements. A tally was compiled by identifying common themes from workshop and interview notes, with tallies added for each mention of a theme by a participant. However, this approach does not represent a quantitative data analysis due to several factors. Firstly, questions were not posed in a yes/no format to each participant, and responses were not solicited from every individual for every question. Therefore, tally numbers do not represent frequencies 'out of x participants' but rather indicate how often a theme was expressed and noted. Additionally, tallies were only counted for unprompted mentions in participant responses, potentially excluding non-verbal expressions of agreement.

In reflecting on the insights gathered from participants, it's important to consider various factors that may have influenced their responses and overall sentiments. One notable observation was the difference in the motivations of participants, with some attending the dialogue to

express frustration while others aimed to provide constructive feedback. Interestingly, there was a loose correlation between their responses following this distinction.

Furthermore, it's essential to highlight the confusion expressed by participants regarding the distinction between public hearings and development permit board hearings, indicating a need for clearer communication and education on these processes. Tensions also surfaced regarding the potential changes to democratic processes to align with specific political agendas, underscoring the complexity of balancing inclusivity with efficiency in decision-making. Following the workshop, it was notable that some community members expressed a strong desire to retain public hearings rather than abolish them, signaling diverse perspectives within the community on the role of such processes in shaping land-use decisions. These reflections offer valuable insights for refining future engagement efforts and enhancing the effectiveness of public participation in decision-making processes.

MOVING FORWARD

1. REFORM NOT ABOLITION

"Eliminating public hearings would increase mistrust and cynicism that is already there. Public hearings are a reality check for people who are trying to represent us."

-Rita Wong

The findings from our engagements underscore the necessity of reforming the public hearing process rather than abolishing it entirely. The 105 Keefer hearing in 2017 highlighted the vital role public hearings play as a reality check for elected officials. Advocating for systemic changes that promote accessibility and remove barriers to participation is crucial to fostering a more democratic and inclusive society.





2. ENHANCE ACCESSIBILITY

Moving forward, it is imperative to prioritize inclusivity and accessibility in public hearings. The urgent need for greater accessibility and accommodations, as evidenced by the 105 Keefer hearing, necessitates further reforms. Efforts should include providing language translation services, offering extended breaks, and ensuring larger meeting spaces to accommodate individuals with disabilities and elders. By enhancing accessibility, we can ensure meaningful participation for all community members and create a more equitable decision-making process.

3. GO TO THE PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

Increasing community engagement by conducting hearings in affected communities can bring decision-makers closer to the people they represent and broaden the range of voices heard. Conducting public hearings in familiar, culturally safe, and community-oriented spaces, as suggested by participants, can enhance accessibility and representation. Bringing councillors to the people rather than expecting communities to come to City Hall can help bridge existing gaps in participation and ensure that all voices are heard in the decision-making process.





4. CULTURAL COMPETENCY (LANGUAGE AND TRANSLATION)

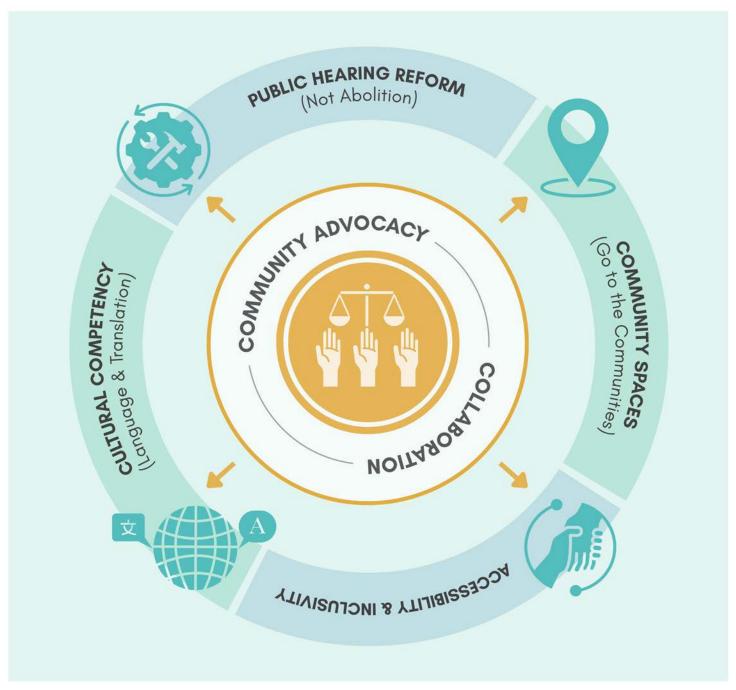
Improving communication is essential for fostering trust and transparency in the public hearing process. Efforts to enhance outreach should include providing materials in plain language, disseminating information through community channels, and offering language translation services. Addressing language barriers and ensuring cultural competency in communication can empower community members to effectively participate in public hearings and advocate for their interests. By prioritizing cultural competency, we can create a more inclusive and accessible public hearing process.

In conclusion, the insights gathered from our engagements underscore the critical need for reform in the public hearing process. The 105 Keefer hearing serves as a poignant reminder of the barriers faced by communities in participating meaningfully in decision-making processes. Advocating for systemic changes that prioritize inclusivity, accessibility, and cultural competency is paramount to fostering a more democratic and equitable society. By reforming rather than abolishing public hearings, we can address mistrust and cynicism, empower communities to voice their concerns, and ensure that all voices are heard in the decision-making process. Through collaborative efforts, we can create a public hearing system that truly reflects the diverse voices and perspectives of our communities, fostering greater transparency, accountability, and community engagement in land use decision-making processes.









WORKSHOP CONCLUSIONS: ENHANCING DEMOCRACY & EQUITY



APPENDIX

LINKS AND REFERENCES

- 1. Merrick Architecture—Revised Rezoning Application for 105 Keefer https://wayback.archive-it.org/8849/20210407062953/https://rezoning.vancouver.ca/applications/105keefer/documents/1-LetterofIntent.pdf
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- 4. Clips from Public Hearing re: 105 Keefer www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oDx8xMpYNM&list=PLwmJ60AB0vF50IKxmYTROrjwPYSVsVliF



WHAT WE HEARD REPORT: VOICES OF THE CHINATOWN COMMUNITY IN PUBLIC HEARINGS AND ENGAGEMENT

PRODUCED BY THE SFU MORRIS J. WOSK CENTRE FOR DIALOGUE'S RENOVATE THE PUBLIC HEARING INITIATIVE IN COLLABORATION WITH THE HUA FOUNDATION

JUNE 2024