

## On the Importance of Neighborhoods and Good Consultation



Hello Better Infill--

For Edmontonians who've responded to city polls or open houses on infill, only to find plans are practically finished, Larry Beasley suggests a better way:

*“Doing a poll or having an open house:  
that's how you get started, it's not how you finish.”*

This is the second in a series based on our September 11, 2024, interview with renowned urban planner Larry Beasley. It focuses on the importance of neighborhoods and the keys to good public consultation. If you value your neighborhood, you'll want to read this. As Larry says, “Neighborhoods are one of the fundamentals of a liveable city.”

There's a rising sense across Edmonton (and Canada) that infill redevelopment is laid down on neighborhoods from above, by city hall and infill developers. City hall used to work intensely with neighborhoods on infill planning; now it gives an inside position to developers, while citizens are left on the outside.

Larry spoke with Better Infill's Marie Gordon about neighborhoods, good public engagement, and much more. The full interview will be posted at [BetterInfill.ca](https://BetterInfill.ca). These transcripts have been edited for clarity and readability, with Larry's approval.

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- ✔ Adapt it.
- ✔ Use it to make Edmonton better.

--From the team at Better Infill.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF NEIGHBORHOODS.

“Neighborhoods are one of the fundamentals of a liveable city. Cities are getting so huge and complex that local sense of place is becoming even more important. Neighborhoods are at the essence of what I think good communities are about. In cities around the world that are losing some of that neighborhood identity, those are getting to be places that are kind of felt to be concrete jungles.”

*“It’s one of the fundamentals, that is government is going to govern with its people, it has to listen to the people.”*

“[T]he fact that a city takes the reality of hundreds of neighborhoods, and has to organize that into a coherent arrangement so they can provide services, is one thing, and every city is doing that. What cities also have to do is always have a conversation going with residents, with people at the neighborhood level. It's one of the fundamentals, that if government is going to govern with its people, it has to listen to the people.”

## ON GOOD CONSULTATION.

“There's a bit of a crisis, an anxiety, across the country. You could be in Regina or Winnipeg or Halifax, and in many ways people have the same kind of anxiety. Almost all of our midsize cities are quite liveable, but they do now have to change, and people are not feeling attached and connected and influencing in that change.”

“Where I think real learning and information exchange happens is in the heat of a face-to-face engagement.”

“People come at public engagement in different ways. Some people have a lot of time and energy and want to be involved a lot. There's another group of people that's much bigger, who want to be involved and are involved day-to-day in their community. They run the boards of the community center and the childcare, and they want to have some engagement. And then there's a larger group that are busy doing other things in life, and they want to be consulted, but they don't have a lot of time. You have to have different techniques for these different groups. That's how you put together effective engagement.”

“The second aspect of effective engagement is you have to feed back to people what you heard, and what you changed because of what you heard.”

“There has to be very strong commitment in the local government to not just saying, I will do three meetings and say I'm done, but engaging in many techniques with people, and then feeding back the results of that, so they can see you haven't just attended the meeting as a planner, and never really changed your mind on anything.”

“In really good engagement, you want to find ways to reach out to the most skeptical and the most critical people. Sometimes you'll hear people in government call those NIMBY people - Not In My Back Yard. I don't like that word because it tends to say, I don't have to listen to you because you're not listening to me. If you talk to them about the issues, very often they'll see some benefits of what change could look like. That helps form a kind of a community consensus on a way to move forward. Feedback and reaching out to people who are feeling frustrated is very, very important. It's not just a general thing of doing a poll or having an open house. That's how you get started, it's not how you finish.”

*“...when we start having those discussions, we can often find answers and ways forward that really do embrace and deal with issues people have, and find different ways to do things.”*

“What we have found, and this is universal across the world, that when we start having those discussions, we can often find answers and ways forward that really do embrace and deal with issues people have, and find different ways to do things. That's the real essence of what a community needs to do, to be in control of its change and to embrace the results.”

“It behooves every planning service to collaborate and reach out to the development community, because it is the developers who make the change that happens. But planners must also equally reach out and form strong bonds and collaborate with the citizen community, so that they're getting balanced input. Elected officials must make sure they do the same thing.”

“Those public relationships that need to occur with citizens, have to have feedback mechanisms. They have to have ways that the planner can show that when she engaged with you, she heard you, and she didn't just stay 100% with her own thinking the way it was when she started. Otherwise, why hear you? It has to be genuine.”