Trusting residents

How building trust and sharing power can generate value for a community

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The Montreal borough of Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie is home to more than 100 ruelles vertes. These "green laneways" – found throughout the City of Montreal – are the result of a wildly successful experiment in putting power in the hands of residents. Their success and rapid spread across the city begs the question: Do municipalities trust their residents?

Hundreds of Montreal's laneways, alleys, and small roads have been given over to local residents to manage. Many have features like gardens, art work, and play spaces; but, the residents responsible for these "ruelles vertes" are free to choose how they're used. At a recent conference, Borough Mayor François Croteau of Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie was asked how they had overcome resistance to the ruelles vertes. He replied quickly and succinctly: "We had to trust the people."

While considerable attention is paid to how much citizens trust their governments – about half of Canadians tend to say they trust government to "do the right thing" – the question of whether governments trust their citizens has been the subject of much less research. One survey of 320 public administrators in New Jersey found that public administrators neither strongly trust nor distrust their citizens.[1] This was an admittedly small study, but the result hints at something interesting. We know that residents don't particularly trust their governments; but, perhaps governments don't particularly trust their residents either. We'll return to why this is important; first, though, let's explore examples of what trust can look like in practice – and the kinds of positive outcomes it can generate.

1 Kaifeng Yang, "Public Administrators' Trust in Citizens: A Missing Link in Citizen Involvement Efforts," *Public Administration Review*, Vol 65, No 3 (May 2005): pp. 273-285. Retrieved from http://www.jstor.org/stable/3542504.

Trust and Respect

Do municipalities routinely trust residents to manage public resources? Community gardens, for example, have much in common with the ruelles vertes. Many are on municipal land and, although municipalities sometimes dedicate staff to support them, most gardens make their own choices about what type of gardening is (or isn't) allowed, how people join the garden, and what happens when they leave. Like the ruelles vertes, community gardens often dramatically improve or regenerate public spaces, thus adding to their cultural, community, and environmental value.

Are municipalities routinely willing to use your institutional capacity to enable residents? Municipalities often entrust neighbourhood associations and highly localized groups to know their immediate community wants and needs. In the City of Kitchener, the neighbourhood associations run programming in city-owned community centres. Essentially, the city provides a building, covers associated costs like insurance and utilities, and entrusts the neighbourhood associations to tailor programming according to their community's wants and needs.

Do municipalities routinely protect the time and energy that residents have invested? On the western edge of Kitchener-Waterloo, land has been transformed into world-class mountain biking trails by the entirely volunteer-run Waterloo Cycling Club Trails Committee. Consistently voted amongst the best Canadian trails East of the Rockies, the cycling club is responsible for trail building and maintenance, as well as aspects of health and safety. The "Hydrocut," as it's known (because parts of the trails wind under hydro lines), includes nearly 30 kilometres of trails and sees more than 40,000 visitors a year. While the Region of Waterloo provides the land (and the liability coverage), there are countless

volunteer hours invested in the trails, and these efforts are protected by a 25-year stewardship agreement between the region and the cycling club. The agreement not only encourages long-term planning, but also assures the trails committee that the land won't suddenly be used for some other purpose.

There are two things to note about the above examples. First, there's a clear role for the municipality in each example. None of these initiatives would be possible without the levers of the municipality. But, the outcomes they achieve wouldn't be possible if the municipality acted alone.[2] There is municipal land, municipal buildings, liability coverage, and utilities behind each of these examples. Regional by-laws even help protect the Hydrocut trails from damage by limiting other types of activities like driving 4x4s. This is actually a role bureaucracies are very well placed to perform. It can, for example, cost a municipality as little as $4 to provide insurance to an individual community garden (and its gardeners). It's this "infrastructure" that enables residents to be at the forefront of generating much of the value.

Second, not all aspects of municipal affairs would suit – or even benefit from – trusting residents in this way. There are policies and programs that don't directly impact residents and that wouldn't

necessarily benefit from their energy and expertise.

The opportunities to trust residents are actually growing, however. It's now possible, for example, for highly localized energy production (e.g., solar panels on homes), leading some municipal governments to experiment with new forms of energy governance. Our Energy Guelph (OEG) is a nascent attempt to capture the social and economic benefits of this transition. The City of Guelph is one partner, alongside residents and other stakeholders, but the hope is that OEG will "empower community … to determine (energy) priorities" and find creative ways to deliver on these priorities.

Relinquishing control over decisions – but not responsibility for them – is a scary prospect, of course. Public administrators can point to past experiences that undermine their willingness to take a risk, and the paradox is that low trust in government makes risk-taking harder. This is what Rosemont–La Petite-Patrie had to overcome in order for the ruelles vertes to flourish; but, these examples show the many reasons why the risks are worth it.

Building Trust with Residents

Energy production is also a useful example because it's an issue that will require collaborative action across sectors, including the active participation of residents. Municipalities that want their community to trust them and to work collaboratively to address pressing

problems will need to make deliberate efforts to build that trust. The question is: How?

Trusting *residents* might actually be the answer. The results of surveys about residents' trust in government (and the smaller body of research on government's trust of residents) echo what's known about trust more generally – that trust is mutual and reciprocal. Residents aren't particularly inclined to trust government in part *because* governments aren't particularly inclined to trust citizens either. So, to build trust in government, municipalities will have to show that they trust their residents.

One common thread across each of the examples is that they change the flow of power, authority, and financial resources within the municipality. Changing the rules of the game like this is one way you can hope to achieve different (even better?) outcomes *and* build residents' trust. Making this the norm, and not the exception, would represent a significant change.

If you work for a municipality, ask yourself – do you trust residents, and how can that become your starting point? While not every area of municipal mandate is ripe for the kinds of trust displayed in these examples, the author of the New Jersey study suggested that municipalities adopt a similar principle to that of juries – innocent until otherwise proven. In this case, what might be possible if municipalities were to adopt the idea of "trust until otherwise proven." **MW**

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2 Jocelyn Bourgon, former clerk of the Privy Council, has written extensively on this idea. See her book, *A New Synthesis of Public Administration: Serving in the 21st Century*, Kingston: School of Policy Studies and McGill-Queen's University Press, 2011.