

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT?

The case of referendum approval in
Quebec urban planning

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Abstract

The case of the referendum approval process in Quebec urban planning speaks to governance issues being faced by democratic regimes. Upholding deliberative democracy as the imperative for local governance can be at odds with the realization of concrete results from planning practice, particularly from an equity-oriented perspective. This project seeks to understand how the referendum approval process for land use in Quebec affects the ability of local governments to approve and facilitate residential development. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipal urban planners, and thematic analysis was applied to identify emergent findings. Interviews were supplemented with a short interview with a provincial civil servant, as well as perspectives gathered at a participatory event on public consultation. This research reveals a fundamental conflict between normative ideals of democratic participation and practical, equitable housing development. The findings show that the process significantly impedes residential development through increased costs and delays, as well as structural issues favouring opposition, which together may be dampening needed housing supply. There are short term procedural changes that can improve the accessibility and utility of the referendum process, but more fundamental changes must also be made to the nature of public participation in Quebec planning. The results of this study raise important questions for planning practitioners across jurisdictions. Participation has been a fundamental principle of planning theory and practice for several decades, but to successfully promote equitable democratic citizenship and develop effective policy grounded in lived experiences, participation must be implemented with a focus on these outcomes. For development to meet both current and future needs, these decisions should not be made solely by current residents, who have a vested interest in the preservation of their communities.

Résumé

Le cas du processus d'approbation référendaire en urbanisme au Québec illustre les problèmes de gouvernance auxquels les régimes démocratiques sont confrontés. Le maintien de la démocratie délibérative en tant qu'impératif de la gouvernance locale peut entrer en contradiction avec l'obtention de résultats concrets dans la pratique de l'urbanisme, notamment dans une perspective axée sur l'équité. Ce projet vise à comprendre dans quelle mesure le processus d'approbation référendaire affecte la capacité des gouvernements locaux québécois à faciliter le développement résidentiel. Sept entretiens semi-structurés ont été menés avec des urbanistes municipaux, puis une analyse thématique a été appliquée pour identifier les résultats émergents. Les entretiens ont été complétés par un bref entretien avec un fonctionnaire provincial, ainsi que par les contributions lors d'un événement participatif sur la consultation publique. Cette recherche révèle un conflit fondamental entre les idéaux normatifs de la participation démocratique et le développement équitable et efficace du logement. Les résultats montrent que le processus entrave considérablement le développement résidentiel en raison de l'augmentation des coûts et des délais, ainsi que des problèmes structurels qui favorisent l'opposition. À court terme, des changements de procédure peuvent améliorer l'accessibilité et l'utilité du processus, mais des changements plus fondamentaux doivent également être apportés à la nature de la participation publique en urbanisme au Québec. Les résultats de cette étude soulèvent des questions importantes pour les urbanistes, peu importe la juridiction. La participation reste un principe fondamental en urbanisme, mais pour promouvoir une citoyenneté démocratique équitable et élaborer des politiques efficaces basées sur l'expérience vécue, elle doit être mise en œuvre en gardant ces résultats à l'esprit. Pour répondre aux besoins actuels et futurs dans le développement immobilier, ces décisions ne devraient pas être prises uniquement par les résidents actuels, qui ont un intérêt à la préservation de leurs communautés.

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Abbreviations

CMHC – Société canadienne d’hypothèques et de logement (Canada Mortgage and Housing Corporation)

LAU – Loi sur l’aménagement et l’urbanisme (Act respecting land use planning and development; “the Quebec planning act”)

LERM – Loi sur les élections et les référendums dans les municipalités (Act respecting elections and referendums in municipalities)

MAMH – Ministère des Affaires municipales et de l’Habitation (Quebec Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing)

OCPM – Office de consultation publique de Montréal

OGAT – Orientations gouvernementales en aménagement du territoire (Provincial land-use planning guidelines)

OUQ – Ordre des urbanistes du Québec

PHAQ – Programme d’habitation abordable Québec (Quebec Affordable Housing Program)

PPCMOI – Projet particulier de construction, de modification ou d’occupation d’un immeuble (Special construction, modification or occupancy project)

SHQ – Société d’habitation du Québec

UMQ – Union des municipalités du Québec

VRM – Villes régions monde

Introduction

Citizen participation has become an expected norm in the municipal political sphere. In planning theory and practice, participation has for several decades been a fundamental value in advancing equitable democratic citizenship and generating effective policy grounded in people's lived experiences. Jurisdictions have taken different approaches to enshrining participatory democracy in local decision-making.

In Quebec, a notable mechanism remains opaque to many: the referendum approval process in urban planning (*le processus d'approbation référendaire dans le contexte de la prise de décision en urbanisme*). The referendum empowers residents to have a veto over certain development projects in their immediate vicinity, imposing a constraint on municipal governance. Many residential projects in recent years have been abandoned simply because the threshold for a referendum was met, without the vote being held. The process seemingly fails to create an avenue for diverse opinions to be shared and negotiated. Meanwhile, citing the lack of sufficient and affordable housing in Quebec, governments are increasingly enacting exceptions to bypass the referendum.

The case of the referendum approval process in Quebec speaks to wider governance issues being faced by democratic regimes. Though the Quebec referendum is unique, it can be understood through the lens of participatory planning within multi-level governance. Where governance systems involve multiple actors in complex relationships, the need to

reconcile conflicting rationales may enhance the representativeness of decision-making but may also stymie effective governance. Upholding deliberative democracy as the imperative for local governance can be at odds with the realization of concrete results from planning practice, particularly from an equity-oriented perspective. When consultation and participation become the end goal, to what extent does this prevent important decisions from being taken? Do local participatory processes give disproportionate influence to certain groups at the expense of others? How do we reconcile the apparent scalar tension between local participation and regional decision-making?

In the context of these governance dilemmas, this project aims to answer the following research question:

How does the referendum approval process for land use in Quebec affect the ability of local governments to approve and facilitate residential development?

This question will be explored through three concrete sub-questions: 1) What are planners' experiences with and perspectives on the referendum process? 2) Does the referendum process support democratic participation? 3) What can we expect for the referendum in the future, and how could it be improved?

To answer this research question, seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with municipal urban planners. A thematic analysis method was applied to the interview transcripts to identify key themes and ideas that emerged. The information from the interviews was supplemented with a short interview with a provincial civil servant, as well as perspectives gathered at a participatory event on public consultation in April 2025.

This report is structured as follows. First is a review of selected key literature on public participation in planning, situating Quebec's referendum process within perspectives on participatory democracy. This is followed by an explanation of the complex referendum process and its recent legislative history. The findings of the thematic analysis are then presented, focusing on key themes that emerged from the interviews, supplemented by other information sources. The report concludes with a discussion of the ideas and conclusions that emerged from the analysis, as well as recommendations for future practice.

Chapter 1. Literature Review

“Citizen participation in local planning and development processes has long been recognized as essential both for equitable democratic citizenship and for effective interventions that recognize and respond to everyday lived realities” (Mitlin, 2021).

Public participation in urban planning has been extensively studied. Previous research has established multiple perspectives on the role of participation; these are grouped here into three broad perspectives, or problem definitions. Within policy studies, “problem definition” refers to the process of characterizing problems in the political arena which then informs the solutions enacted by policymakers (Rochefort & Cobb, 1994). In the case of participatory planning, the problem may be that public input is not adequately reflected in decision-making; that participation is not representative of public opinion or of demographic composition; or that we are unable to achieve equitable outcomes by focusing on the democratic process. The first speaks to the normative goal of participation in municipal governance and the democratic imperative of public debate. The second reflects concerns over the representativeness of local consultation based on a lack of equitable participation. The third offers a critique of democratic participation in planning as existing at odds with the realisation of effective or equitable outcomes in planning practice.

These perspectives can then be applied to the case of the referendum approval process in Quebec urban planning. Though the Quebec referendum is unique, it can be understood through the lens of participatory planning within multi-level governance (Hooghe & Marks, 2010). From these three problem definitions, it may be that we need to strengthen the referendum procedure; prioritize representative participation; or abandon the referendum. We can therefore situate Quebec's referendum process within perspectives on participatory democracy.

1.1 Defining 'equity' and 'community'

Two contentious concepts are at the heart of this project and merit discussion: "equity" and "community". These terms both have multiple definitions, often with normative connotations. They can be problematic when used as imprecise catch-all terms, which is common across disciplines, including in planning practice.

Practitioners will refer to "equity" without specifying whether they mean procedural equity, distributional equity, or equality of opportunity. Equity can refer to fairness in process (who gets to participate and how), fairness in outcomes (who benefits from planning decisions), or fairness in access to opportunities (Talen, 1998). The application of equity also depends on the relevant comparison groups and who has the authority to decide how it is measured: between individuals, demographic groups, geographic areas, or other units. If equity is specifically for disadvantaged groups, someone must determine which groups qualify for special consideration and how membership in these groups is accorded (Brand, 2015). All these conceptions of equity are important, as equity should

be embedded across all practices (Meerow et al., 2019). However, different equity goals can also come into conflict with each other. Democratic participation is often based on procedural equity, but this can privilege the interests of the majority at the expense of distributional or substantive equity (Fainstein, 2014). Equity is often invoked as a professional value in planning practice without a clear conceptual definition, and potential conflicts between different concepts of equity remain underexplored.

The concept of “community” is often evoked within planning practice as both a geographic and social conceptualization. Projects and proposals may evoke goals such as “community-driven” and “community engagement”. It may be used interchangeably with “neighbourhood”. Though often used in a positive context, communities can be exclusive, insular, or organized around controversial values, while still being “community-oriented”. What constitutes a good or desirable community is entirely subjective, making community engagement neither universally beneficial nor problematic. Hallman (1984) defines community as “a people within a limited territory possessing shared values, common interests, and norms of conduct, engaging in social interaction and mutual aid, and having their own groups, associations, and institutions to help meet their basic needs”. More simply, community may be understood as the people living within a small area and who therefore share some common interests. The boundaries and scale of a community are often ambiguous: it may refer to a city block, a neighbourhood (i.e. a few blocks), a district or borough, even a municipality (particularly in a less urban context). These distinctions are often nebulous; Park and Rogers (2014) define neighbourhoods as “communities with a more tangible and geographic concept”, essentially place-based communities. For others, community may be defined residentially by home locations, or

it could be a different place where people spend much of their time. A community may also have no geographical fixation to a place, and rather be formed of people in relationship based on shared experiences or values (Blokland, 2017). In practice, planners may tend to define the “local community” based on who participates in consultation processes. Different communities may have conflicting interests on the same proposal, raising questions about which community’s voice should take precedence. More weight may be given to different community voices based on those who are more vocal at public assemblies, as well as planners’ assumptions about which groups are disadvantaged.

Given these complexities, who has the authority to define both equity and community reflects underlying power dynamics that planning processes may inadvertently reinforce. For local planning proposals, those currently living within the local jurisdiction tend to be the population chosen to participate. Planning practice would benefit from more explicit reflection and acknowledgement of which conception of equity is being applied and why, how community boundaries are drawn, and whose voices are heard in participatory processes. These complexities underpin many of the discussions in this study.

1.2 Problem definitions

1.2.1 The normative goal of participation

In municipal politics and urban planning, direct citizen participation has become an expected norm (Sally & Tighe, 2015). In planning theory, communicative or deliberative

planning has been particularly influential since the 1990s (e.g. Healey, 1993), often drawing on the work of Jürgen Habermas (1996). This has often been referred to as “the ‘communicative turn’ in planning theory” (Inch, 2015). A further distinction can be made between deliberative (consensus-seeking) and agonistic (respectful disagreement) planning theory (Inch, 2015). In this school of thought, many authors such as Forester (1989) and Kohn (2001) argue that deliberative debate and antagonism in the public sphere are necessary components of functioning democracies. Forester (1989) argues that planners must wield communication as a tool for supporting the public debate and fighting misinformation. From this perspective, existing participatory institutions should be strengthened to allow more public deliberation. The fundamental normative value of democratic participation championed by communicative theorists is embedded in our social and political systems, creating pressure for politicians to be seen as responsive to their constituents. Particularly at the local level, where municipal representatives are most proximate to their electorate, direct democracy can often be valued over representative democracy.

Multi-level governance theory helps us to understand the distinctive characteristics and demands of municipal politics (e.g. Durose & Lowndes, 2010). Municipalities in Canada have historically been seen as administrative bodies rather than autonomous political governments and legally exist only as “creatures of the provinces” (Magnusson, 2005). The concept of “proximity governance” at the local level has been used to advocate for the legitimization of municipalities as fulsome governments, defending their authority against perceptions that municipalities lack the resources or expertise to make decisions with the full confidence of the population. In Quebec, the province in 2017 officially recognized

municipalities as proximity governments (*gouvernements de proximité*) rather than creatures of the province, though this remains largely symbolic for the time being. This change had been advocated by groups such as the Union des municipalités du Québec (UMQ) for several years, as both a symbolic recognition and a demand for increased revenue-generation powers for municipalities beyond property taxation. However, it has been suggested that the willingness of the provincial government to recognize an increased level of municipal autonomy at this time arose from an austerity agenda, as it was accompanied by drastic provincial cuts to municipal transfer payments (Mévellec et al., 2017). Indeed, when property taxation is the only significant revenue generation mechanism available to municipalities, this can have real consequences for municipal governance. Municipalities have been shown to depend on growth to continue expanding their property tax base, necessitating continuous residential development which is argued to influence policymaking (Logan & Molotch, 2007).

Meanwhile, there is a body of literature arguing that governments increasingly offer no space for debate or legitimate contestation in what is referred to as “post-political” theory (e.g. Mouffe, 2005; Carr & Hesse, 2020). When something becomes controversial and ends up on the political agenda, it is no longer viable or of interest to those who would rather operate without controversy, whether to protect their reputations or avoid costly delays. Avoiding controversy is a necessity if the priority is the acceleration of development. Indeed, municipalities such as Montreal have been heavily criticized for prolonged permit approval processes (Teisceira-Lessard, 2024 May), indicating a consensus beyond government that development should be accelerated. Public consultation is another element that can be seen as an obstacle to accelerating production.

Meanwhile, the demand for rapid housing construction without public consultation can be perceived by some as part of a pro-growth agenda, favouring private developer profits and municipal property tax revenues over the needs of residents. Participatory processes embedded in planning may be the only available avenue for residents to stand up against this agenda, and weakening such procedures can raise concerns about participatory democracy (Morel, 2018).

From this perspective, then, we should be strengthening deliberative democracy in planning. If inequality is perpetuated through uneven access to information, then communication which serves to clarify should enable a more egalitarian exchange of ideas towards the common good. Under the right conditions, theorists such as Forester (1989) believe it is very possible to have a deliberative democratic process in which citizens in the public sphere agree on the premises and arrive at reasonable shared outcomes. There is therefore a responsibility for urban planners to mobilize the public to attend consultation meetings and participate in opportunities for deliberative debate.

1.2.2 Prioritize representation in participation

Participatory processes are not uniquely wielded to achieve equitable outcomes. Formal state-run public consultation processes have been criticized for not achieving representative participation and supporting exclusionary planning (Einstein, 2021). Neighbourhood meetings are a cornerstone of urban planning practice today, part of the steep regulatory requirements for development that exist at the local approval stage (Scally & Tighe, 2015). Most North American cities require local hearings as a standard

part of development review (Einstein, Glick, & Palmer, 2020), and public consultation assemblies are an obligatory part of Quebec's referendum process. These types of local forums have been shown to lack procedural equity. As decisions are made based on the participation of an unrepresentative segment of the population, this can in turn enact distributional inequities in land-use proceedings. This is shown in an illustrative case study of local meetings in Massachusetts, USA (Einstein, Glick, & Palmer, 2020). Across the state, "neighborhood defenders" were found to make effective use of land use regulations and opportunities for participation to block development; even delaying projects provided significant negotiating leverage. When citizens succeed in blocking proposed development, they are often decried as NIMBYs ("not in my backyard": see Gent, 2022; Inch, 2015; Kramberger, 2023). However, Einstein, Glick, & Palmer (2020) argue that to tackle the exclusionary priorities voiced at neighbourhood assemblies, housing advocates must understand that resistance can be not just individualistic but highly community oriented. Participants are often motivated by community-wide interests, and resistance to development can act as a unifying force for a community. Nevertheless, perceived fears can drive opposition, regardless of what is "true", and have profound effects on development. The outcome of these meetings is often that an unrepresentative portion of the current population (disproportionately older, white, and homeowners in this case) succeeds in diminishing the supply of housing and preserving neighbourhood homogeneity (Einstein, Glick, & Palmer, 2020).

It is unclear from the Massachusetts case whether unrepresentative participation is because marginalized populations must overcome higher barriers to participate in public assemblies, or rather because participation is higher based on one's degree of opposition

to a project and that strong opponents tend to be from a particular demographic profile. Likely the answer is a combination of the two. What is evident is that opportunities for neighbourhood-level participation that are theoretically neutral will disproportionately amplify the voices of privileged residents, particularly older, white, homeowners.

When participatory processes disproportionately represent the perspectives of homeowners, these will tend to result in exclusionary outcomes. This can be explained by understanding the very nature of the Canadian housing system, where the idealisation and subsidisation of homeownership pushes people to put all their financial assets into their home (Hulchanski, 2006; Christophers, 2021). The home is often the asset holding value for retirement funds and generational wealth accumulation (Walks, 2016). Historical inequities have caused homeownership to be largely inaccessible for many racialized and marginalized communities, creating a cyclical relationship with barriers to generational wealth perpetuated by “the intergenerational transmission of inequality through housing” (Christophers, 2018). For homeowners, their decision-making and politics become increasingly about what they need to do to protect their investment. This tends to lead to protectionist, exclusionary and anti-development politics (Einstein, 2021). Meanwhile, governments are put in an impossible bind between protecting real estate values for the homeowner population, while somehow addressing housing affordability for those who are not (yet) part of the homeowner class (Hulchanski, 2006). Opening avenues to participation in decision-making on local development can reduce barriers to involvement. However, this can result in privileged actors such as private developers, homeowners or other organised pressure groups taking over that process (Angotti, 2011; Mitlin, 2021). Without actively prioritizing representative participation,

there is no way to ensure that the voices of marginalized groups or the “silent majority” are heard in consultation. Otherwise, those with power may continue to have more influence over decision-making.

Because of differences in resources and social capital, some residents are more willing and able to take advantage of theoretically neutral opportunities for participation (Angotti, 2011). Indeed, participatory processes inherently privilege the voices of those who choose to participate, possess the means to do so, or are selected by those overseeing the process (Inch, 2015). Many factors can encourage or limit participation, such as geography, the scale of consultation, and individual capacity. The disinterested population cannot be forced to participate, but the above cases show that the selection of participatory methods can make a difference. It is disingenuous to assume that because anyone is theoretically able to participate in a public assembly, the results of this assembly are therefore a representative basis for decision-making. The choice of a participatory method is never neutral, as it will always privilege or exclude certain voices. The question therefore becomes who should participate, and how public officials can reach these people to enable their participation. In an advocacy planning approach, civil servants and elected officials can choose to implement equity-oriented approaches in everything from the manner of public communications to the time and location of assemblies, to targeted mobilization that consults marginalized perspectives. It is crucial that municipalities anticipate equity gaps when organizing opportunities for neighbourhood participation in land use planning.

1.2.3 Participation at odds with outcomes

Finally, there has been critical reflection on the emphasis on participation as a normative goal in planning. Upholding deliberative democracy as the imperative for local governance can be at odds with the realization of concrete results from planning practice, particularly from an equity-oriented perspective (Fainstein, 2014). Reforms that increase local participation in decision-making, such as the decentralization of governance, generate a “confrontation between efficiency, equity, and democracy” (Colin & Robertson, 2005).

There is a key question of the scale of participation. At the municipal level, where land use planning typically takes place, there is a particularly high expectation for public input to influence decision-making due to the proximity of local constituents to their “proximity government”. There is an argument to be made that people are most directly affected by a project or regulation at the neighbourhood level, but by excluding non-residents this tends to ignore the important impacts for people living in a broader community or region (for example, a constrained and unaffordable housing supply). Local participation in decision-making on specific development proposals is often only amplifying discriminatory and exclusionary viewpoints and can be traumatizing for marginalized current or potential residents (Pothier et al., 2021). Scally & Tighe (2015) identify how empowering local consultation to influence planning decisions results in inequitable siting of affordable housing, and lack of development altogether. The authors present developer perspectives on how reducing barriers to development in New York State, particularly disempowering hyper-local opposition, would result in better affordable

housing outcomes. Participatory policies tend to empower current residents without giving voice to anyone else with a stake in the proposal.

Indeed, it is not only privileged residents whose perspectives are amplified by traditional planning processes. From the mere fact that it is residents who can participate in local consultation processes, by virtue of geographic selection, we may conclude that these processes are inherently biased against development. Participatory planning systems exclude the people who could benefit most from development: future residents who do not yet live in the community. The legitimacy of a democratic process could be questioned if it only includes those who will bear costs from a decision and excludes potential beneficiaries. Neighbourhood change is the privileged topic of consultation, while other changes, such as life and housing changes for future residents, are ignored.

To take equity seriously on its own terms, we may need to define and prioritize equitable outcomes rather than procedural democracy (Fainstein, 2014). Even if we change processes to achieve representative participation, weighing all voices equally does not translate to equitable outcomes. Instead, the challenge may be that we need to collectively define equity and then translate these values into policy. This could mean that municipalities need to directly commit to distributional equity through inclusionary planning, preventing displacement, and building housing to meet needs, regardless of the level or demands of resident activism (Pothier et al., 2021). Attempts at institutionalizing public participation have been criticized for undermining substantive participation rather than supporting it (Mitlin, 2021). On the other hand, given opportunities for public participation by municipal governments, residents may be able to organize and have significant power. A study of city-sponsored, resident-led neighbourhood associations in

Hamilton, Ontario, found that connection and community education are important to evolving local attitudes in favour of inclusionary development (Pothier et al., 2021). Institutionalized participatory forums can either encourage or resist exclusionary outcomes, and planners can support involved residents to develop an inclusive vision for their community. Focusing on how communities can resist residential displacement, the authors highlight diverse effective strategies employed by resident associations, from negotiating with developers to supporting tenant organizing, but point out that volunteer associations will never have the resources to prevent displacement in perpetuity (Pothier et al., 2021). There can still be an important place for the energy of concerned residents to be channeled into constructive community associations that shift focus from site-specific fights to working towards broader inclusionary goals.

Instead of focusing on project-specific decisions at community consultation meetings, which arise from spot rezoning, participatory planning could proactively establish neighbourhood or area-wide zoning regulations advancing inclusionary housing outcomes. This involves engaging residents at an earlier (upstream) point in the process, but meaningful engagement can still happen at a local level. Then, it is the job of planners and municipal staff to translate that into by-laws. Decisions about where housing is located and what housing types are built must be made with both our current and future needs at the forefront, and current residents with a stake in the preservation of their communities may not be best placed to make these decisions at a local scale.

1.3 Participatory governance in practice: The referendum

It is evident that public participation has complicated implications for local democracy, and that there are always obstacles to good planning and community engagement. However, it is also clear that we can imagine doing things differently, based on various problem definitions. On the one hand, public consultation is not participatory or representative enough. On the other, it is too likely to block development or advance exclusionary decision-making. It is unclear whether people do not participate because they are disadvantaged, or because they do not feel strongly about the outcome; and whether achieving more inclusive participation would change the outcome for development decisions. We must consider possible alternatives for facilitating robust public participation in housing governance towards constructive outcomes.

To better understand these dilemmas for urban governance, this project grounds this discussion in a concrete analysis of Quebec's referendum process in practice and considers how public participation could be done differently. There is a need to document whose voices and perspectives are being amplified by the referendum process in Quebec and where it is serving purposes that are exclusionary or profit driven. It is important for urban governance to balance the need for robust public participation in housing planning with the urgent need to get housing built, especially affordable and social housing that meets the needs of current and future residents. This research will shed light on the extent to which the referendum process poses problematic constraints on local governance, or whether Quebec municipalities can achieve equitable residential development regardless of this process.

The referendum approval process in Quebec may be unique, but the fundamental questions that arise from the referendum are rooted in universal dilemmas for the legitimization of democratic regimes. Problem definitions for public participation in urban planning can help us define answers to the question of what to do about the referendum. If public input is not adequately reflected in decision-making, we must strengthen the referendum process. If participation is not representative of public opinion or of demographic composition, we must prioritize representative participation. If we are unable to achieve equitable outcomes by focusing on the democratic process, it may be better to abandon the referendum. Each gives rise to possible solutions to respond to the need for a better system for participatory decision-making in Quebec municipalities.

1.3.1 Quebec's evolving referendum process

The referendum process was enshrined in Quebec in 1930 to defend private property rights. As the right to participate in a referendum or election has always been reserved for eligible voters, at its inception it was only male, educated landowners who could participate. This gradually changed when the right to vote was extended to all men regardless of tenure or education (1936), all women (1940), people aged 18-20 (1963), and Indigenous people living on reserves (1969) (Veilleux, 2019; Elections Quebec, 2025). Of course, it is still only Canadian citizens who can participate in a referendum. It is enshrined in Quebec law since 1979 within the Quebec planning act, the *Loi sur l'aménagement et l'urbanisme* (LAU). Meanwhile, the process for the referendum vote is enshrined in the Act respecting elections and referendums in municipalities (LERM). It

is the responsibility of the level of government responsible for local planning regulations, typically the local municipality or borough. There is a required public assembly for most proposals (open to all, not just eligible voters), but only certain projects can be subject to the referendum. These include changes to planning regulations, as well as site-specific proposals involving changes to certain objects of the regulations on zoning (e.g. increased density allowance), subdivision, and conditional uses. Since the mid-1990s, the process has consisted of three stages, each with a minimum threshold of voters: the request to participate in a referendum; the keeping of the register (whereby citizens register their intent to vote in a referendum); and the referendum itself, where citizens can vote for or against the proposal (Gouvernement du Québec, 2024).

In the case of a site-specific proposal, participation in the referendum process is based on the geographies set in the zoning bylaw. Eligible Quebec voters residing within the zone and in the zones immediately adjacent (contiguous) to a proposed site can participate. The register is only opened in those zones that reach enough signatures in the first stage. In the case of a proposal covering the whole territory (the municipality, or the borough in the case of Montreal), such as a new Urban Plan or zoning by-law, there is no first stage and only one register is opened for the whole territory. Following the results of the register, if the threshold of signatures is met, the Elections Act (art. 559) allows municipalities to choose between withdrawing the proposal or continuing to the third stage of the process: the referendum ballot itself.

The process can thus hand an effective veto over development proposals to a very small percentage of residents in a community. Participatory policies tend to empower current residents without giving voice to anyone else with a stake in the proposal (such as

residents of the larger region or the future residents of a community). This is especially true with the referendum, where only current residents in contiguous zones can vote. Perhaps the most publicized use in recent years has been in Montreal's West Island, where the referendum has been empowering citizens to block transit-oriented densification around future REM (Réseau express métropolitain) light rail stations (Kramberger, 2023; Teisceira-Lessard, 2024 Aug.). The Fédération québécoise des municipalités, the Union des municipalités du Québec, and the Ordre des urbanistes du Québec have all called the current referendum process dysfunctional or lacking credibility (Gauthier et al., 2020). These and other groups are currently participating in the provincial working group on consultation and referendum approval in 2025.

The referendum process has a freezing effect: the mere threat of a referendum is often enough to deter developers or local governments from pursuing a proposal. Bherer, Gauthier & Simard (2018) characterize Quebec's referendum process as antagonistic (as opposed to consensual): the objective is to make visible the various and dissenting perspectives on an issue (rather than to negotiate a compromised outcome). However, it is challenging for this objective to be realized when the process is rarely seen to completion. If the threshold is met at the register stage, municipalities typically choose the option to withdraw the proposal. A project will be cancelled or sent back to the drawing board rather than holding the referendum ballot. In 2023 in the Pierrefonds-Roxboro borough of Montreal, after a register was signed by just 26 residents, a proposed 111-unit redevelopment project next to a future REM station that had been in development for two years was cancelled (Teisceira-Lessard, 2024 Aug.). This pattern has

been attributed to the high financial cost for Quebec's resource-constrained local governments to hold referendums (Bherer, Gauthier & Simard, 2018).

It may be that this is an example of post-political theory (Mouffe, 2005; Carr & Hesse, 2020): if a project is sufficiently controversial to pass the registry, it is often abandoned to avoid controversy. It could also be argued that this is a benign decision by resource-constrained developers and municipalities, both of which are making rational choices to put their limited resources into projects that are more likely to succeed. Developers are in business to make a profit, not to engage in fraught participatory processes that affect their public reputations. Municipalities hear the concerns of their electorate at every city council meeting. It is rational for them to prefer to operate without controversy. Nevertheless, it is a reality which impacts local democracy: how can people engage on development when developers, and municipalities, seek the path of least resistance?

1.3.2 Referendum reform to accelerate housing production

With growing pressure to dismantle barriers to housing development, the Quebec government is increasingly citing housing needs to enact exceptions to the referendum process (Veilleux, 2019). Experts and public agencies have continued to ring alarm bells about Canada's insufficient housing construction needed to meet population growth (CMHC, 2023). A lack of housing supply is being connected to Canada's housing affordability crisis. Toronto and Vancouver are among the most unaffordable housing markets in the world, and Montreal may be following suit as the cost of housing outpaces income growth. From 2001 to 2021, census data shows the average value of owner-

occupied dwellings increased by 252% in the Montreal metropolitan area. Average market rent increased 79%, while median household income increased 61%. Since the last census, average rent has increased a further 31% (CMHC, 2025).

The housing unaffordability crisis in Canadian cities has increasingly pushed lower-income people to live in poorly served suburbs, exacerbating issues such as transport poverty (Ades et al., 2016). Like other cities, Montreal has seen an increasing spatial polarization of income. Across the Montreal region, the highest income growth from 1981 to 2016 was observed in the outer suburbs, while lower-income communities were concentrated in on-island communities away from downtown and poorly served by transit (Breau et al., 2023). Proximity to desirable amenities is becoming a choice only available to the wealthy, evidenced by income growth in car-dependent exurbs that have seen single-family residential development. It is often in desirably located residential neighbourhoods close to public transit and other amenities where “neighbourhood defenders” seek to use participatory processes to block infill development (Einstein, Glick, & Palmer, 2020).

The acceleration of unaffordability has raised concerns among many housing advocates. Rising prices are often attributed to a lack of housing supply, thus demanding an increase in housing production (Glaeser, 2023). However, census data shows housing supply outpacing population growth: from 2001 to 2021, dwelling counts increased 31% in the Montreal CMA, while population grew 25%. (Similar trends were seen in Toronto and Vancouver (Statistics Canada, 2023).) Rising “supply skepticism” among affordable housing advocates, “questioning the premise that increasing the supply of market-rate housing will result in housing that is more affordable,” has drawn academic attention

(Been et al., 2019). Research on this question typically examines how new housing supply affects prices at neighbourhood, city, or regional levels (e.g. Asquith et al., 2023). A review by Been, Ellen & O'Regan (2025) finds that increased supply generally decreases rents or slows rent growth, particularly across cities and regions, with more mixed results at smaller neighbourhood scales. While new supply can lead to socio-demographic changes, they found no evidence that it causes significant displacement of lower-income residents. The authors note that skepticism is often localized and overlooks citywide and regional affordability benefits, warning that such opposition may hinder citywide affordability efforts. They emphasize that although market-rate housing is necessary, it is not sufficient: government intervention is still necessary to provide deeply affordable homes.

Indeed, many jurisdictions are grappling with the tension between local resistance to development and top-down pressure to increase housing supply. Stronger evidence of regional affordability benefits from housing supply may be unpersuasive to local housing advocates, while homeowners may fear that new development will depress their property values. This raises questions about the scale at which land use decisions should be made and whose input should be considered. In recent years, many US states have adopted “more aggressive strategies” to force local governments to reduce restrictive zoning bylaws and allow new development (Been, Zhang & Kazis, 2023).

Within a context that many have termed a housing crisis, the Quebec government has enacted successive legislative reforms to reduce the scope of the referendum, citing housing supply gaps. The 2017 reform of the Quebec LAU granted all municipalities the power to exempt specific projects from referendum, including social housing. These are enshrined in article 123.1: “(1) collective equipment within the meaning of the fourth

paragraph [generally, public buildings and facilities]; (2) housing intended for persons in need of help, protection, care or shelter, in particular under a social housing program implemented under the Act respecting the Société d'habitation du Québec (chapter S-8); or (3) a cemetery.” Similar exemptions are enshrined in the city charters of Montreal (paragraph 89.1.4); Longueuil (para. 58.2.4); and Quebec City (para. 74.4.4). The 2017 reform (Bill 122) also introduced the ‘public participation policy’. This mechanism allows municipalities to forego the referendum entirely if they adopt a robust participation policy, meeting many stringent criteria as denoted in the legislation. Perhaps due to an unwillingness to abandon the referendum, very few municipalities have adopted a participation policy to opt out of the referendum (OUQ, 2024).

The next significant legislative change to the referendum was in 2023. Bill 16 enshrined additional exemptions, including accessory dwelling units as well as proportionately minor density or height increases relative to the initial value. The legislation also allowed incentive zoning in Quebec for the first time, whereby municipalities can incentivize developers to provide public benefits by allowing them to exceed zoning regulations. For example, municipalities can now grant developers additional dwelling units or developable capacity in exchange for benefits such as affordable housing, public parks, or community spaces. Many more changes to the referendum were initially proposed in Bill 16, including additional referendum exemptions; repealing the provincial public participation framework introduced in 2017; and replacing public assembly with written feedback as the baseline for consultation. This generated significant opposition, with some academics and experts arguing that these measures would harm our democracy and were ignoring how citizen participation could positively influence public decision-making

(Flon et al., 2023). Most of these changes were retracted from the final law until the completion of the provincial working group on consultation and referendum approval (*le chantier de travail en matière de consultation et d'approbation référendaire*). This working group was ultimately delayed until 2025, and it is underway as of the publication of this study.

The following year (2024), Bill 31 introduced a temporary referendum exemption for all residential projects in municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants and a vacancy rate below 3%. Colloquially referred to as the municipal “superpowers”, this exemption allows municipalities to entirely bypass urban planning regulations without a referendum, though still requiring a public consultation. This is particularly distinguished from other discretionary powers such as the PPCMOI (special construction, modification or occupancy project), given that these powers require conformity with the urban plan and only allow discretionary modification of site-specific rules in the regulations on zoning, subdivision, or conditional uses. The Bill 31 “superpowers” allow a proposal to be passed that does not conform with the urban plan itself, rather than requiring the municipality to update its urban plan.

Previously, there seemed to be a stronger concern that bypassing participatory processes such as the referendum would place municipal representatives at odds with their constituents. In 2023, this concern was stated to this author by the mayor of a West Island municipality, who refused to invoke LAU article 123.1 to bypass the referendum for a small social housing project involving the renovation of a former senior’s residence. Now, with the increasing consensus around the urgency of the housing crisis, there seems to have been a political shift. With a view to accelerate housing production, we have seen

rapid municipal uptake of the “superpowers”. Within months of the adoption of this legislation, Magog invoked Bill 31 to approve a private residential project of around 40 units, citing the need for “soft densification” (Radio-Canada, 2024). Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu used the superpowers to approve the Mission Unitâinés project, which will produce 100 units of affordable housing for older adults (Vanderschelden, 2024). The new powers have since been used at least 11 times in Montreal as well as several instances in Rimouski, Granby, and elsewhere across the province (Venne, 2025). In May 2025, the Montreal borough of Verdun—Ile-des-Sœurs announced it would use the superpowers to approve a residential project shortly after the Quebec Housing Minister publicly criticized the borough for not initially doing so. The mixed-use project with 525 housing units, situated near the Ile-des-Sœurs REM station, would otherwise have been cancelled after a register obtained just 26 signatures (Teiscera-Lessard, 2025).

Bill 31 may be a temporary measure until the referendum process can be reformed to the satisfaction of the many actors involved in Quebec’s multi-level governance system. However, if the process is inequitable by design, it may not be possible to adapt it to achieve better outcomes. Quebec’s referendum process originated from an agenda to defend the interests of private property owners (Veilleux, 2019). As with many traditional participatory processes, neighbourhood homogeneity is being preserved by dictating where housing and public amenities can be built (Einstein, Glick, & Palmer, 2020). Any efforts to reform or scale back the process, as have been occurring in recent years, must carefully consider whose interests are being protected. It may be that reducing opportunities for exclusionary ideologies to dictate planning by scaling back hyper-local participation will result in better outcomes and more non-market housing. On the other

hand, this scaling-back may instead benefit real estate developers and land speculators, who can build more and denser housing that is not affordable for its residents. (For an examination of the Toronto case, showing how the financialization of housing is worsening the affordability crisis in purpose-built multifamily rental housing, see August & St-Hilaire, 2025). If the problem is that we are not managing to build enough housing to meet demand, it may be that this is solved by removing barriers to development that arise through public participation. However, if the problem is that the right housing is not being built to meet people's needs, or development is prioritizing densification over quality of life, it may be that (equitable) public participation is not sufficiently influential in the planning process.

It is crucial to consider at what point participation becomes an end in itself, and whether this is preventing important decisions from being taken—often at a different scale from where participation is occurring. Many questions emerge from this discussion, which will be considered in the following analysis. They are pertinent not just for Quebec but for issues being faced by many democratic regimes. Who benefits from robust local participation in planning? Whose needs are being met by scaling back the referendum and accelerating housing production? How do we balance the potentially conflicting interests of current and future residents, or local and regional needs?

Chapter 2. Methods

Within the context of participatory planning theory, this project aims to understand the perspectives and experiences of municipal urban planners managing Quebec's referendum process in their regular professional practice. Academic and interest group perspectives on the Quebec referendum have been fairly well documented, if not extensively studied (e.g. Gauthier et al., 2020; OUQ, 2024). Though other groups such as community organizations or real estate developers could have been interviewed for this research, urban planning professionals were identified as the key study group. They are responsible for the practical administration of the referendum process in their regular work and can uniquely speak to the practical challenges of managing this process.

This project began with an effort to identify past use cases of the referendum, but no centralized source of information was found. This was confirmed by inquiries with the provincial Ministry of Municipal Affairs and Housing (MAMH), the Ordre des Urbanistes du Quebec, and a professor from the University of Montreal. Therefore, a digital news media scan was used to find examples of past use cases of the referendum. The media scan was used to develop an initial contact list of planners in municipalities and boroughs with documented use of the referendum process in the past five to ten years. Some recommendations were also obtained from professional contacts. Ethical consent for the study was obtained from the McGill Research Ethics Board (Appendix A).

Potential participants were able to choose whether to participate based on their availability and personal sense of experience with the process. Several initial contacts passed the invitation on to colleagues who they identified as better placed to answer questions on the referendum. When interviews were conducted, “snowballing” was used to obtain references for other potential respondents. To obtain participant consent, information was provided including an overview of the research project, data storage, and the right to withdraw from the project, as well as the confidentiality of their participation in the study.

Within the time constraints of this project, seven hour-long, French-language interviews were conducted between March and April 2025: six with municipal urban planners on the Island of Montreal and in Quebec City, and one with an urban planner who consults for municipalities across the province. The interview guide is included in Appendix B. One additional short interview was conducted with a MAMH employee, focusing on the ministry’s ongoing working group on consultation and referendum approval.

In addition to these interviews, I also attended a participatory event on April 10-11, 2025, organized by Villes régions monde (VRM): *Les 10e Rencontres VRM—Pour un nouvel agenda en participation publique: comment adapter les outils au contexte de transition socio-écologique?* (The 10th VRM encounters—For a new agenda in public participation: How to adapt the tools in the context of the socio-ecological transition?) Designed to bring together academics and professionals to exchange ideas, it had an audience of around 100 attendees, primarily researchers and public participation professionals. The perspectives gathered at this event provide a useful complement to those collected during the

interviews, enabling a form of data triangulation (whereby different data sources are compared to test the validity of the results).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of participants. The transcripts were encoded using thematic analysis, which seeks to identify and organize information within common themes (Boyatzis, 1998). Through an iterative coding approach, initial codes were identified from the transcripts. This process was primarily inductive (codes were generated directly from the data), though previous research on the topic facilitated the identification of both manifest and latent themes. These codes were then clustered and assigned to common themes. The results of this analysis are presented below, organized into six themes: why referendum votes do not happen; whether the referendum enables participation; impacts of the process on development outcomes; the role of municipal planners; changing the referendum; and focusing on public consultation.

Chapter 3. Findings

Quotes included in this section are translated from French. They are numbered to facilitate identification with the original quotes, included in Appendix C.

3.1 Why referendum votes do not happen

Interviews began with the question of the subject's professional experience and their experience with the referendum process. Most commonly, the immediate response to "has the referendum been used in your experience" was *referendums do not happen*. What they meant was that it is extremely rare to reach the third stage of the process: the referendum vote itself (*le scrutin référendaire*). If the threshold of signatures is met at the register stage, municipalities usually choose the option given to them under the Elections Act to withdraw the proposal. The result of the register is taken as evidence of local opposition and the proposal is cancelled, or the developer is sent back to the drawing board, rather than organizing a referendum. There was a strong consensus among respondents that cost is the primary reason:

These days, a municipality is never going to make it to the referendum ballot stage. It takes a lot of political courage to get there, which isn't always the case, and it also takes a lot of financial resources. It's extremely expensive to get to that stage.

So, in fact, it's often unjustified to go to that stage. It really has to be a project with societal benefit.'

All but two respondents had no personal experience with reaching the third stage of the process. Some could identify singular occurrences of referendum ballots held in other jurisdictions.

Further along in the research process, a discussion emerged about whether developers should be asked to pay for referendums in discretionary project cases. This could solve the cost issue but may raise significant ethical concerns where developer money is paying for an election process. Furthermore, in practice it would be surprising if developers were willing to pay additional costs for a project. They are more likely to retract their proposal and revise it or go elsewhere. Indeed, one respondent described a case where a small project was proposed at three storeys where the zoning allowed for two; both the borough and the developer felt the project was uninteresting at two storeys, but the neighbouring citizens were unwilling to support the height increase. Then, when the “superpowers” came in under Bill 31, the project returned—and was swiftly approved—at six storeys. The new project included affordable housing, so the municipality chose to approve it with no possibility of referendum.

Aside from the cost, respondents also identified referendums being avoided due to conflict aversion from elected representatives and developers. As the “proximity government”, municipal elected officials bear the brunt of public opinion and often would rather respond to controversy over a proposal by retracting it. One interviewee, who has

worked as a consultant for many municipalities, described that in some towns the population will oppose nearly any municipal proposal:

There are municipalities in Quebec where there's so much mobilization, it's scary ... we're no longer capable of managing the city. ... Often, my only recommendation is to hire public consultation firms to work on the messaging to tackle misinformation, but that's very expensive and [can be for unimportant issues] ... They don't always have the budget to do that.²

When delays are prolonged due to the referendum process, especially if a registry is triggered, some developers will choose to simply retract their proposal (when it is permitted to do so) rather than move on to the next stage in the process. Most respondents echoed the urgency and conflict avoidance of the private sector:

Developers are definitely allergic to uncertainty. So they're going to be reluctant to embark on a process without knowing whether, in the end, they're going to succeed with their projects, so they're bound to make every effort to avoid [the referendum] and propose a compliant project.³

Some respondents did share rare instances of referendum votes that were seen through to the end. These were always in exceptional cases and resulted from very strong political commitments to seeing the referendum through, occasionally as a result of citizen mobilization demanding a vote. One interviewee had been the lead municipal planner on a two-stage private housing project. The first phase bypassed the referendum a decade earlier, under a pro-development city council; this caused significant local backlash and lasting tension in the neighbourhood. When the approval process for the second phase

was initiated, the project had become so politicized that the newly elected city council committed to holding a referendum this time around. The referendum was successful and the project was approved. The interviewee hypothesized that many residents may have voted in favour of the project just to put an end to the years-long tension in their neighbourhood. Another referendum example was in a very small municipality, where public controversy had blocked a previous effort to update the urban planning bylaws. On the second attempt to revise the bylaws, the city council committed to having a referendum. They chose to bring the question to the municipal election, so that the cost of the referendum was absorbed by the normal election proceedings.

In an interview, a MAMH employee identified changes in public attitudes towards the referendum in recent years, which they attributed to growing anti-NIMBY sentiment. A previous reflexive working group (*chantier de réflexion*) on the referendum was conducted by MAMH in 2017. At that time, the referendum was more of a “sacred cow”—people did not want to see it changed. There was more mobilisation to protect the referendum. Today, abolishing the referendum is no longer out of the question. The respondent speculated that this change in attitude has been due to the increasing publicized uses of the referendum by NIMBYs, which has caused it to fall somewhat out of favour as a participatory tool. The current provincial working group on consultation and referendum approval is underway until the end of 2025. The MAMH employee stated their ministry’s goal is to produce a proposed legislative change by mid-2026 (before the next provincial elections), “otherwise [the working group] will have been for nothing”.⁴

3.2 The referendum as a participatory process

The referendum process was widely described as complex and inaccessible. Many respondents agreed that “the procedure is incredibly cumbersome and incomprehensible to 99.9% of professionals, elected representatives and the general public”.⁵ This complexity was identified as a manifest barrier to citizen participation. One respondent with more planning experience noted that the process was “complexified” in 1996, when the first two stages were added (the request for a referendum, and the opening of the register). Prior to this change, discretionary bylaw amendments were virtually nonexistent since they were sent straight to the referendum. This change therefore made it easier for municipalities to have flexibility in their regulatory processes—but it also made the process far more complicated than before.

The complexity of the process, as well as the rigidity of the traditional in-person participation format, was identified as a factor in unrepresentative outcomes. There was a general sense that participation in the referendum process is unrepresentative of the population, particularly in more urban areas. However, most stated that those who want to participate will do so, and therefore some respondents did not find that representation was a concern in terms of self-selected democratic participation. Some respondents also reflected that it can be easier for people representing organisations and interest groups to participate at traditional public consultations compared to individuals. They may be less intimidated to speak publicly, and their voices may be given more weight by elected officials given that they claim to speak on behalf of a larger group.

Respondents did not generally identify profiles or characteristics, such as income, race, or gender, as being more correlated with participation. One respondent suggested that anglophone areas tend to have more individualistic private property interests compared to the more community-oriented francophone culture. Another respondent from a suburban jurisdiction stated unequivocally that homeowners participate far more than renters. They described how their planning department knows that proposals in areas with a higher proportion of renters are more likely to succeed due to a lower chance of public opposition. (Of course, especially in suburban areas, tenants are highly correlated with higher-density development, and this built form is more conducive to infill development than a single-family neighbourhood. Several planners emphasized the importance of integrating development into the existing built form.)

In contrast, a planner in a more urban area stated that in their experience, this difference in participation only holds true with respect to social housing projects. Opposition to social housing tends to be concentrated among homeowners and landlords, given their vested interest in property values that is not shared by renters. (Indeed, higher property values can be a problem for tenants as it can lead to gentrification and upward pressure on rents.) All Quebec municipalities can bypass the referendum process for social housing since 2017, but in less urban areas they may be more reluctant to do so. The necessity of exempting social housing from the referendum was echoed by many respondents. The process can enable exclusionary priorities to be masked under concerns such as the integration of the built form:

We recently had a project that was not subject to referendum approval, but it was a social housing project in [a central area in my borough]. I can send you the link

to the public consultation. People were very against it, saying ‘Oh, I’m against the height of the project’. But then you hear them talking, and in fact what they’re against is the fact that it’s going to be social housing. So these are situations that come up, and they’re frankly not very pleasant to see. It doesn’t bring out the best in people.’⁶

There was a general consensus that the largest predictor of participation is opposition: people are more likely to show up if they oppose a proposal than if they support it. Many respondents said that the referendum process is by design “an opposition process, not a process to support a project. So it’s somewhat contrary to the very spirit of public participation.”⁷ As an example, people are asked to sign the register if they oppose a proposal, not if they support it. If insufficient signatures are collected to meet the threshold, the proposal is automatically approved. When the referendum votes are not held, there is no opportunity for people to formally indicate their support of a project. On the other hand, it was raised at the VRM event that for higher-level consultations such as the Montreal Urban Plan (PUM), people only voice their support for changes and it is often challenging to solicit participation from contrary perspectives.

In some areas, participation is generally very low and public consultation assemblies are poorly attended, unless there is citizen mobilization around a particular proposal. Some respondents described being surprised at sudden large attendance to oppose a proposal when a similar regulation had recently passed with no opposition. In some cases, respondents said they “don’t see how we can mobilize a positive response to a project, when we’re already having trouble mobilizing people in general to come to public consultation meetings.”⁸ In other areas, there had been occasional efforts to seek out

perspectives from interest groups or to get out ahead of a project that is foreseen to be controversial or poorly understood by citizens. In Quebec City, the city council newly elected in 2021 introduced a participation policy (not to be confused with the formal public participation policy that permits bypassing the referendum), which was designed to increase consultation with the scale of the project. However, a city planner described how a more recent policy was enacted to accelerate housing production in Quebec City:

The city has adopted a housing vision... the objective is to accelerate housing construction to deal with this crisis. ...I think the other criticism we're going to have [from the public] is that with these processes, we're doing the opposite of what we've been doing in recent years, where we held upstream consultations and then try to take more time with projects. Bill 31, on the other hand, is the opposite: it's all about moving very quickly, with just one public consultation. So I think that in terms of social acceptability, this is going to represent a challenge. But the argument is that there's a housing crisis, so we need to build housing quickly, so that's the city's argument, and that's what the tool is for.⁹

A question that emerged during the interviews, with opinions on either side, was the extent to which it is worth engaging seriously with the concerns raised at public consultations or whether it is a waste of resources:

Where we have [real estate] projects, it's my opinion, and the opinion of my colleagues here internally, ... we don't see any added value in having higher citizen participation other than having more [NIMBYs]. Public consultation meetings for real estate projects are always, always, one, two, five people or a group

representing people who are going to oppose the project for their own benefit. So the added value of their involvement in the process is debatable. It's not about the substance of the project, it's really about the impact on their property, their asset, their view.¹⁰

The common concerns voiced by residents tend to be similar across neighbourhoods: circulation-related concerns such as parking and congestion, and property values. Social housing is less tenable in more suburban areas, while planners in some less affluent areas described prominent interest groups that only want social housing and oppose all market development. Many respondents echoed that “everyone agrees with sustainable development, but no one wants density nearby.”¹¹ Respondents had varying degrees of sympathy with this perspective at an individual level but generally framed it as problematic at a neighbourhood or regional level in the face of current housing needs. There is a clear tension faced by planners between the need for infill development to increase housing availability and the protection of neighbourhoods by current residents. Some respondents expressed a sentiment that people living near key amenities, particularly public transit, should have to share the benefit by having more development in their neighbourhoods.

3.3 Impacts on development outcomes

There was no consensus on the extent to which the referendum process is useful in terms of its outcomes for planning and development. This was partly rooted in ideological differences among respondents on the inherent value of public participation as an end in

itself. Some felt that democratic participation is a core principle of urban governance, while others expressed frustration with the referendum giving a small number of residents power over decisions with greater social importance:

The problem is that new projects like this, especially in Montreal, are always urban infill. And every time, people are afraid of change. Maybe the changes are necessary. For example, we talk about the housing crisis, then we say we need to build, OK? Well, to build, we often have to aim for buildings that are denser than what we have now. So, a denser building next to people who have been living there for a long time, and who take it for granted that things are going to stay as they are. There's no doubt that the arrival of a bigger building generates anxiety about parking, sunlight, overcrowding. But it's possible that this project is in the wider public interest, so it's difficult. It's hard to see that sometimes a few people who live next to a project have all the power over its future.¹²

The referendum process demands time and resources, and the result depends on public opinion: therefore, it adds delays and uncertainty to planning and development. In more densely populated jurisdictions, some planners did not find the process as posing a frequent barrier to the realisation of projects, though it remains a “sword of Damocles” (a lingering threat hanging over their heads). From a more suburban area, a senior planner area stated that “80% of the projects submitted by developers were failing because of public opposition. Now that we have a participation policy, it's better. But we still unfortunately have a high failure rate.”¹³

Some interviewees expressed that the public deliberation encouraged by the consultation and referendum process can improve the result. One stated that deliberations and consultation should take longer as the community will be living with the result for the decades to come. Another described experiences with consultation where some residents know their neighbourhoods better than those proposing projects and can have good contributions which improve project outcomes.

[With consultation processes] things can improve. Citizens' expectations have to be reasonable, and the developer must be prepared to make concessions. It's a bit like any negotiation. Then the city must arbitrate. So there may be some projects where we could look at it and say, well, it didn't really do us any good, we may have wasted more time. But there are others where we can say we've seen improvements.¹⁴

Other respondents had a more expert-led view of planning, where professional judgment takes precedence over community input in determining what constitutes good planning and development. They expressed that the process rarely has “value-add” for development outcomes, and projects do not generally turn out better for engaging with people's concerns. They had not found the contributions from public consultations to result in better plans for local development, only additional delays and resource demands:

What often makes projects of poor quality, in fact, is that the construction budget is cut, etc. The further along you go, the longer it takes, the less money there is to finance the construction of the project. That's when you start cutting back on materials, making fewer interventions, a little more mundane, that sort of thing.

In my opinion, we're undermining the quality of the projects by [having longer approval processes].¹⁵

Implicit in this view is the assumption that planners can objectively assess the quality of plans and projects. In this view, uninformed contributions can be a hindrance to planning.

Many respondents attempted to balance professional planning against public input, suggesting that there are cases where planning professionals can judge how to prioritize the social good over local opinion. There was a clearer consensus that public institutions should bypass the referendum, compared to residential development which remains more controversial, perhaps because of the implication of private real estate interests. Schools in particular often face opposition for generating noise and disruptions to local street traffic, yet schools must be located in every residential neighbourhood. Several respondents highlighted the necessity of retracting institutions, particularly schools and hospitals, from the referendum owing to the challenges of obtaining neighbourhood approval:

Let's say a hospital is subject to referendum approval. It's a case where for the neighbours, yes, the anxiety is legitimate, but maybe this hospital is absolutely necessary for a population of 500,000 people. So I find that referendum approval can be difficult to justify, depending on the nature of the project and its size. In a very large project, it can give too much power to too few people.¹⁶

Nevertheless, the housing crisis was independently identified by most respondents as requiring the acceleration of housing production, including the approvals process. Even

among those who highly valued participation, several suggested that exceptions or accelerated review are necessary for residential development:

It's often the case that there's no real value-add to [more professionals looking at a project]. And in a housing crisis where we know there's a shortage of supply compared to demand, I think it's worth asking the question: aren't there some aspects we're looking at that should no longer be looked at? ... I think we're always adding a layer because we always want better projects. But in the end, I'm not sure that the quality of projects has increased any further by adding all these rules.¹⁷

A few respondents identified that the referendum process poses a risk of alienating developers and dampening housing supply. Many developers will retract proposals if the second stage of the referendum process is triggered because the additional delays are increasing their project costs. Further, it is challenging to secure financing for social housing if project approval is up in the air, and the poor acceptability of social housing can lead to prolonged consultation. Exceptions such as the Montreal City Charter are therefore necessary to accelerate social housing approval, particularly under current provincial and federal funding programs which mandate rapid project timelines. At the same time, there was also some ambivalence about the results of acceleration: when asked about the new Bill 31 “superpowers”, several respondents said we will have to wait and evaluate the results of this policy. One senior planner expressed frustration with the increasing pressure to push through development:

The aim of the superpowers is to reduce delays, because developers were spending their time in delays with cities. For us urban planners, taking a year to study an 8-

10 storey project ... we're going to be living with this project for the next 100 years. I don't agree with the view that we just need to find a quick compromise and move on. If you consult, if you hold public meetings, there's no doubt that you'll eventually find a compromise with the developer and the public. But that takes time.¹⁸

At the VRM forum, a perspective shared by many attendees was that public participation is necessary to build consensus for the systemic changes necessary to address such large issues as the housing and climate crises. Many participants articulated that in our democratic system, systemic change requires forming a more broadly shared consensus on the necessary change. We may want to bypass public consultation now to get things done, but this can have the effect of further eroding public trust in the system. Public participation is therefore the avenue to strengthen trust in our democratic institutions, and we need to improve how the public sector consults its citizens to work towards a broader consensus on systemic change. As many attendees at this event were public participation professionals, it stands to reason that they fell strongly on the side of deliberative planning theory. A common perspective was that more robust upstream participatory avenues will improve consensus-building and reduce instances of the referendum process.

3.4 The role of municipal planners

The VRM event revealed an increasing trend towards the professionalization of public participation. Nevertheless, planners still play an important role in managing the

referendum process. Many interviewees seemed to feel very bound by what is prescribed in the LAU or found it difficult to envision how procedures could be different from the status quo. Multiple respondents stated that they never heard from people who support a proposal and could not imagine a way of soliciting participation from people who do not take the initiative to participate. None of the respondents suggested that groups other than current residents should be consulted during local planning activities, merely that the process can allow too few current residents to participate. Only one suggested that a different population could be consulted:

Playful activity workshops, consultation with children. I find that really interesting too. There's an emerging trend to consult children, who have incredible knowledge of their environment. Because they're the most vulnerable in society in some ways, aren't they? They're very young, so they see the dangers of certain developments more easily than adults, and they're often more honest too. So there's something there too, there's something interesting about broader consultation.¹⁹

A theme that emerged from the interviews was the distinction between doing just what is required in terms of consultation versus going beyond the minimum. One respondent stated that they cannot have optional higher degrees of consultation for some projects because they must treat all developer proposals the same way:

We're fairly tightly constrained by the law, so there are all the required public consultation procedures. That means public meetings when required. Except that we can't really demand more than the law requires, for example for one project

*versus another. Because we have to treat every request equally and fairly, so we mainly stick to these aspects.*²⁰

Other respondents stated they can and do have more consultation when needed, such as for a proposal predicted to be highly controversial or poorly understood by the population. Some boroughs and municipalities, such as Quebec City, have introduced additional participation processes (though none of the interviewees were from the small handful of municipalities that have adopted the formal public participation policy). This was always connected by respondents to a particular city council elected with the aim of increasing public participation. One interviewee with a broader level of experience identified that planning departments in Montreal boroughs will not go beyond the minimum requirements in terms of consultation, and that this is more common in smaller municipalities—typically done out of obligation when operating in more politically contentious contexts.

Respondents were asked about issues with multi-level governance in planning. One interviewee from a downtown area heavily emphasized an issue of poorly coordinated intervention in planning from higher levels of government. Most respondents did not describe this as a notable concern, so it may be more prevalent with the greater attention paid to downtown Montreal. In other areas, respondents described neighbourhood-level distinctions within their boroughs which can result in vastly different participatory contexts and potentials for local acceptance of development proposals.

Social housing was raised by multiple respondents as a governance issue. Several people mentioned challenges with the new social housing regime following the 2023 shift to the

Programme d'habitation abordable Québec (PHAQ). Under the prior AccèsLogis program, certain cities including Québec, Montreal, and Gatineau were “*villes mandataires*”, responsible for project approvals within their territories (VGQ, 2019). These cities had a given number of social housing units they could allocate within their territory. However, after cuts to the AccèsLogis program led to increasing delays in project completions, the program was replaced by the PHAQ, ostensibly to accelerate approval processes. Under the PHAQ, housing projects are no longer fully funded; public and non-profit housing providers are competing with private developers for funding; and the decisional authority fully rests with the provincial housing agency (SHQ) (Barrett, 2023). This governance shift was cited as a challenge by planners in Montreal and Quebec City:

Previously, a certain number of units were allocated to the city. Then the city managed [the allocation of] units. Today, it's by a call for projects. The city has a little less control over these projects. ... I intervene when the urban planning bylaws have to be amended to allow these projects, but we see this because social housing is also very much in demand. We hear a lot in our consultations that people think we're really authorising more projects from private developers. And that they want to see more social housing. But that also requires the city to have more room to manoeuvre.²¹

Citizen advocacy for social housing tends to be concentrated at the local level, but municipalities no longer have authority in the approval of social housing funding. The only power they hold is the responsibility to approve rezoning where necessary. As previously mentioned, this increases pressure to accelerate zoning approval for social housing given the time required to seek funding approval. All planners interviewed from

the city of Montreal stated that it is a necessity to use the City Charter (article 89) to bypass the referendum whenever social housing projects are being pursued by their boroughs. (This was echoed by the respondent from Quebec City, where a similar clause exists.) Otherwise, these projects may never receive funding, due not only to public backlash to social housing but also to the delays involved in the referendum process.

3.5 Changing the referendum process

Perspectives on the future of the referendum can generally be grouped into two categories: those that want the process to be improved and those that see no value in keeping the referendum. For many respondents, the future of the referendum is innately tied with public consultation, and many suggested that public consultation needs to be improved upon, though the reasons and priorities varied. However, in interviews many respondents would on the one hand emphasize improving consultation, and separately suggest that the current housing crisis demands temporary acceleration:

There have been a lot of changes, most recently in urban planning tools and in referendum approval itself. It's a context that's really changing a lot, and it's against the backdrop of the housing crisis, so everyone has a sense of urgency. Everyone wants the projects to move forward.²²

Those who wanted to see the referendum improved were generally driven by a democratic imperative for responsive local governance. Some also expressed concerns that doing away with the referendum would be perceived as a grab for power and would erode trust

in government. The ongoing erosion of public trust in government was a common topic raised at the VRM event, identified as a key reason for intervention in public participation. There may be a real or perceived concern that some municipalities will have no reason to be responsive to their citizens without the threat of a referendum to hold them accountable.

Suggestions for improving the referendum generally focused on simplification and communication. Given the complexity and expense of the referendum, it is necessary to simplify the voting process and reduce obligations or costs. Most respondents did not have ideas for reducing costs other than simplifying the process to require fewer resources from city staff. One respondent offered the example of combining a referendum question with municipal elections to absorb the cost, though this would not be a solution in most cases given the delays involved in waiting for the election. Several respondents highlighted strategies taken by their municipalities to improve communications, whether project-specific or more broadly improving the accessibility of public information. Some stated that residents should be better educated on the process, though many seemed to prioritize simplification given that the current process is too complicated to explain. Several respondents reflected that it would be better if the process was more positively oriented, in such a way that it was more conducive to mobilizing people in favour of a proposal rather than in opposition to it.

Multiple respondents suggested a change to the voting procedure, which dictates who can participate in the referendum process for a site-specific proposal. Specifically, many see it as arbitrary to conduct voting by zone, and it would be preferable to instead identify voters by a perimeter of a defined distance around the site. Indeed, the zones come from

the zoning bylaw and are based on planning practice, not electoral democracy: zones have no uniformity in area, population, or any similar characteristic. Two respondents described this problem as empowering residents who live too far away from a site to participate equally, in the case of incongruous zone sizes. Another respondent pointed out that an area with very small zones can easily give rise to the problem where a very small portion of the population can veto projects that would have wider benefits. The zone definitions are also confusing to many citizens and are identified as an easy procedural simplification. One interviewee described a problem that arises from the design of the referendum process, particularly because of the zonal procedure:

[Opposition] is the primary goal. To such an extent that even if between, for example, the request for submission, the keeping of the register and the vote, if the opposition vote doesn't come out, it means that we can basically put the final vote back strictly in the zone or zones where the opposition vote came out. So sometimes a strategy is to mobilize opposition [in other zones]. Not for its own sake, but to ensure that the voting pool at stages 2 and 3 is wider than being strictly controlled by citizens belonging to a single zone, so it goes that far. So there you go, it's completely contrary to democratic principles, in my opinion.²³

When the first stage of the process is triggered in one zone by receiving enough signatures to demand the register, it can be a tactic to seek out signatures in other zones, so that the voter pool in the next stages is larger and the threshold therefore more difficult to attain. Changing to a distance-based rather than zone-based process would presumably remove this possibility and simplify several technical aspects.

Indeed, at the VRM event the zonal procedure was highlighted as the most likely amendment to the referendum. One presenter suggested that enlarging the zones to have higher participation thresholds would ensure that the referendum is reserved for truly controversial questions. This was corroborated by a MAMH employee in an interview regarding the active provincial working group on consultation and referendum approval. They stated that the most discussed aspect so far has been the zonal parameters for participant eligibility, compared to previous consultations when such a change was strongly opposed. Now, following the consultation, it is the most likely change to occur.

A few respondents suggested that while the referendum should be kept, municipalities should update their planning regulations such that discretionary projects which are eligible for referendum become more exceptional. Planning regulations can still be susceptible to referendum, but this could be more predictable, as with the example of a small municipality using the municipal elections to have a referendum on the new planning bylaws. More respondents cited discretionary regulatory changes as a key part of the planning practice in their jurisdictions:

The PPCMOI must comply with the Urban Plan [unlike Bill 31]. In my opinion, the ideal situation is to have a zoning regulation that allows you to seek a value-add in all projects, that responds to the government orientations. And then to have an urban plan which gives enough leeway to create PPCMOI in exceptional situations that will allow you to seek a value-add, and so on.²⁴

Some respondents projected that planning regulations will all be updated in the next few years to be in conformity with the higher level. The new provincial orientations are now

published, regional master plans will soon need to be updated, and municipal urban plans will follow. Therefore, current policies such as the Bill 31 “superpowers” are a temporary measure until the planning regulations are updated. Nevertheless, one respondent who works as a consultant reflected that “the best solution would have been to force municipalities to review their regulatory frameworks, and then to increase density everywhere”,²⁵ rather than allowing municipalities to temporarily circumvent their own bylaws. Other respondents expressed frustration that density targets being imposed on their jurisdictions did not align with the built environments (density not prescribed in the areas with the most development potential and vice-versa).

Those respondents who were not interested in improving the referendum process generally seemed to think that public consultation does not have a strong “value-add” for planning outcomes, or they could not envision how the process could be improved. There was a sense among this group that the referendum process uses public resources and adds project delays, without a justifiable contribution. This group can further be divided into those who wanted to focus on improving public consultation processes instead, compared to those who did not articulate a strong value of democratic participation in the daily practice of urban planning. Some did not have such a strong opinion against the referendum but felt that Bill 31 and similar reforms signal a possible “death toll” for the referendum, for better or for worse. The referendum will either be abolished altogether or continue to be watered down until it loses any practical effect.

At the VRM event, the audience of researchers and public participation professionals offered perspectives that differed at times from the urban planners interviewed for this study. There was a much stronger consensus on the inherent value of public participation

and the potential for participatory tools to solve major problems, such as the housing and climate crises. A survey was conducted among attendees, which is not empirically representative but the results of which are nevertheless interesting to consider. Of around 50 people who answered the survey, more than half wanted the referendum reformed, one-fifth wanted it abolished, and one-fifth were unfamiliar with the referendum. The remaining respondents thought the referendum should remain unchanged. Though this is not a representative sample, it demonstrates the strong sense among academics and professionals at this event that the referendum is problematic and demands change.

3.6 Focusing on public consultation

Though not all were suggesting ways of doing things differently, many respondents shared the perspective that we need to improve how we conduct public consultation in Quebec. This subject was the key focus of the VRM event. Some interviewees discussed a need to adjust planning law to favour a diversity of consultation approaches, including traditional public assemblies, written and online options, nontraditional workshops and other participatory formats. A broader diversity of consultation approaches seems to yield better results, such as increased and more representative or diverse participation. Some pointed to the pandemic as having positive outcomes: all proceedings were mandated to be online, and some boroughs and municipalities have since retained online or written options for participation. This is generally seen as a significant improvement for giving residents more options. Some respondents described tangible increases in participation, sometimes among previously underrepresented groups such as those with barriers to

attending in-person consultation sessions. Written consultations were also praised for gathering more positive feedback, perhaps because the barrier to entry is lower so project supporters are more willing to participate. Nevertheless, planners still framed the population being consulted as current residents living within their territory.

Some respondents wanted the law to mandate a diversity of consultation methods, while others wanted more flexibility and less specificity in the law to allow for a broader diversity of approaches. Those in the first group typically described their roles as doing the minimum required by law, so to have a diversity of approaches this would need to be explicitly prescribed. Others stated the law only sets out minimum obligations:

We say you have to trust elected officials, but it's also up to elected officials to decide: in my municipality, because my citizens are extremely mobilized, I must implement more [public consultation] than the law prescribes. The law will prescribe the general minimum standard that should apply to municipalities in Quebec, not the exceptions.²⁶

In this perspective, the law should be simplified and allow greater flexibility for choosing when to engage further, but it should not mandate a greater degree of consultation for exceptional circumstances.

As a related example, the public participation policy introduced in the 2017 legislative reforms allowed municipalities to abolish the referendum procedure if they adopted a robust participation policy. Some respondents, as well as many attendees at the VRM event, reflected that the policy has some elements which are a strong improvement over the referendum procedure. However, the full regulation is so burdensome on municipal

administration in terms of studies, reports, and other paperwork, that only six municipalities have adopted the policy. It seems that both the current options are too restrictive (the referendum and the public participation policy). Municipalities would rather have the flexibility to choose the appropriate approach based on the circumstance. One respondent criticized the referendum process for only requiring municipalities to “hear” citizens, compared to the participation policy which mandates a formal response (*rapport de rétroaction*). They described this responsive mandate as strengthening trust and participation in municipal governance. In their view, the province should seek to reduce some of the administrative burden imposed by the participation policy but retain the aspects which strengthen responsive governance.

Across the interviews and at the VRM event, many suggestions were made for developing more responsive and flexible consultation processes. Several people thought that consultation obligations should be reduced when a proposal is smaller or has minimal impact on the immediate area, whereas a greater level of participation (including the referendum itself) should be reserved for more impactful projects. This graduated approach to consultation reflects an interest in more effectively balancing procedural efficiency and democratic participation. Meanwhile, the process of going to the OCPM (Office de consultation publique de Montréal) for larger projects seems to be an appreciated option for those in Montreal. This may be because it takes consultation out of the hands of local planners and ‘officialises’ the process. It can increase project delays, but these delays tend to be more predictable than the multi-stage referendum process. In smaller municipalities, where diseconomies of scale currently limit access to professionalized consultation mechanisms, many are turning to private firms to conduct

public consultations. Some VRM attendees suggested that an office like the OCPM should exist for smaller municipalities. The appeal of institutionalized consultation bodies suggests that by formalizing these processes, we can achieve more predictable and legitimate planning outcomes across municipalities of varying sizes. These ideas for more flexible and diverse consultation approaches, including scaling participation to project scope and institutionalizing professionalized consultation, offer solutions to the ongoing tension between the desire for streamlined approval processes and the need for meaningful public engagement in Quebec planning.

Chapter 4. Discussion

This study sought to investigate how the referendum approval process for land use in Quebec affects the ability of local governments to approve and facilitate residential development. The findings support that the process significantly impedes residential development through increased costs and delays, as well as structural issues favouring opposition, which together may be dampening needed housing supply. Referendum votes rarely occur because the costs are prohibitive, municipalities are conflict averse and developers are “allergic to uncertainty”, so proposals are often retracted rather than face prolonged delays. Nor does the process favour democratic participation when it mobilizes opposition by design: people sign registers to oppose projects, not to support them; supporters have no formal mechanism to express approval when votes do not occur; and the complexity makes the process inaccessible even to professionals, creating barriers to meaningful participation. Delays have particular consequences for social housing, as financing is difficult to secure when approvals are uncertain. Most planners agreed that social housing should not be subject to the referendum, though elected officials may fear backlash from their constituents.

The referendum process provokes questions and problems among urban planners, but no agreement on ways forward. It is evident that the status quo is not working. There is a desire for the process to be changed in a consensus-driven manner, but opportunities for

consensus-building do not appear to be occurring at the level of those who interact daily with the referendum process. A tension emerges from the interviews between projects of a broad social value and the fact that decision-making can be hyper-local. This is an ongoing debate which has been couched as procedural rather than fundamental. Discussions often surround the more easily changeable procedural aspects, such as the geographical catchment procedure for eligible voters, rather than the fundamental questions. At the level of our society, we need to decide the extent to which we want localities to be making decisions about development that has broader social benefits. Local decisions have regional consequences, generating a scalar mismatch problem. In communities across Quebec, there are growing unmet needs for the development of housing, economic centres, public amenities and services. Yet, we are allowing consultation at the neighbourhood level to veto proposals to meet these needs. This reflects an underlying theoretical question concerning the level at which the social good should be defined. Urban planners, while confronting this question in practice, are often limited from engaging with its theoretical implications by the practical demands of their work. The question itself extends beyond what the planning profession alone can answer.

4.1 Understanding who benefits from the referendum

This research reveals a fundamental conflict between normative ideals of democratic participation and practical, equitable housing development. Though the referendum process was criticized for getting in the way of practical outcomes, failing to adequately support participation, or ceding power to a vocal, individualistic minority, there was no

explicit suggestion that the process itself may therefore erode public trust in governance. Some respondents highly valued democratic participation as essential for building trust in government and seeking consensus towards policy actions. There were some concerns that the referendum should not be abolished as this could be seen as a governmental power-grab and harm public trust. Others found the process rarely produced “value-add” for planning outcomes and primarily served to protect the status quo at the expense of broader housing needs. The current housing context appears to have a distinct character that is putting pressure on this dichotomy between public consultation and the acceleration of development. In some cases, respondents would prefer to have more consultation but saw the current housing crisis as a reason for temporary acceleration, though some are ambivalent about the outcomes of acceleration. At the same time, there was a clearer consensus that public institutions should not be subject to the referendum as compared to housing. Even within a confidential interview context, there remains an evident discomfort for many professionals with suggesting wholeheartedly that public participation be deprioritized.

From the literature review at the beginning of this report, the question emerged: whose interests are being protected by scaling back the referendum process? The findings support that scaling back the referendum could prioritize regional housing needs and equity over hyper-local control, shifting from protecting established homeowner interests toward facilitating development that serves broader populations, including renters and future residents. From the interviews, it appears that the current system is favouring established residents over all other groups. By defaulting to the status quo, the process protects current neighborhood character against infill development, even near transit and

amenities. Some respondents indicated that homeowners and organized interest groups benefit more from the current system than tenants and marginalized voices. With more publicized cases of the referendum preventing development, anti-NIMBY backlash has also grown, and the referendum seems to be falling out of favour as a participatory tool. Indeed, by moving on from the referendum it does not appear that privileged interests will exclusively win out (such as those who profit from development)—as long as the effort is instead put towards accessible, innovative mechanisms of public participation. However, these findings are limited by a lack of empirical data and rely on the experiences of participants, which are not necessarily representative of all real-world outcomes. Future research should seek to measure who participates in Quebec urban planning processes and the extent to which this participation is equitable and representative of the population.

The perspectives collected for this research came primarily from municipal urban planners, as well as public participation professionals and academics at the VRM event. It stands to reason that these individuals will have different perspectives emerging from their professional experiences and values, and it is meaningful to be reflexive about their positionalities when interpreting their contributions. Many of the planners interviewed for this study were focused on tangible issues and solutions, such as the procedural aspects of the referendum process. There was less discussion of more transformational or long-term changes. Indeed, working in local planning departments typically requires them to prioritize practical implementation over theoretical debates. On the other hand, many of the VRM participants have devoted their careers to public participation. Given that this event aimed at proposing transformative solutions to systemic crises, their

perspectives may result in overly idealized notions of participatory democracy. Similarly, academics may be more detached from practical implementation challenges and constraints faced by planners on the ground, and it can be their role to put forward ideal or theoretical solutions. Each group has valuable insights to offer and can benefit from learning from each other. The findings of this study are necessarily circumscribed by the experiences and perspectives collected, and the recommendations could have differed if different respondents participated in this process. Nevertheless, given that these groups fall in some respects on opposite sides, this study benefits from combining their perspectives to balance the tension between participatory ideals and tangible planning outcomes. It is by balancing ideal transformations with practical constraints that we can implement successful solutions.

4.2 Bearing the costs of local development

This analysis gives rise to further fundamental questions concerning the social acceptability of local development in terms of costs. As a society, we may valorise certain priorities without acknowledging that they incur costs. An example of this phenomenon is being seen in heritage preservation. In Quebec, many historic buildings (often churches, typically among the oldest structures in a community) have fallen into disrepair, some to the point of requiring demolition for public safety, owing to insufficient private resources to maintain the buildings and a lack of public funding (Perreux, 2019). We have collectively decided to value the preservation of old buildings, but expect the

financial costs of this preservation to be borne by private owners in the absence of public financial support.

When it comes to local development, we are asking residents to make sacrifices or accept costs in the form of inconvenient or unwanted changes to their community. It stands to reason that if you ask people to approve a change to their environment that will not directly benefit them, they will say “no”. In some cases, this may be a temporary inconvenience, such as the presence of nearby construction. However, where we are asking people to accept disruptive changes that will not yield a tangible benefit for themselves or their immediate community, we are relying on a sense of moral responsibility or obligation to others, principles that are not intrinsic. As Einstein, Glick, & Palmer (2020) pointed out, local opposition can be rooted in community-oriented values. Telling people to “do the right thing” by accepting a change they perceive as not benefiting their community may not be an effective way to implement the development needed to meet broader social needs.

An alternative approach would be to frame this argument in terms of community benefits. Consider the broader social good that is at stake, such as building more housing to meet the needs of the population. Ascertain the benefits that the community could receive in exchange for having more households in their neighbourhood: upgraded infrastructure, new parks and public spaces, or other collectively defined benefits. The benefits should be proportionate to the scale of the inconvenience. This notion of “selling” a project to the community is not new, but is not always explicitly framed as such. Where municipalities impose community benefit requirements on developers is one such example. When developers are required to build a community asset such as a park or public space, this is

aiming to provide some benefit back to the community in exchange for the new development. As of 2023, incentive zoning is now permitted in Quebec planning law (through Bill 16), providing a new tool for this type of negotiation. If municipalities enable benefits to be community defined rather than municipally prescribed, for example, this may be a new way to facilitate local buy-in.

An interesting example comes from a different field: the study of parking policy. Renowned parking expert Donald Shoup argued that cities should remove minimum off-street parking requirements and charge fair market prices for all street parking; he also advocated for parking fee revenues being reinvested back into the streets where they were collected (Shoup, 2005). This encourages local support for introducing parking fees, as the benefits can be directly seen on the street where the fee is charged. In this way, we are recognizing a policy (paid parking) with wider social benefit (reduced congestion and “cruising” for parking, encouraging budget-conscious travellers to take other modes) as a local problem (loss of free parking) and offering compensation (investment in street improvements) to benefit local businesses and residents.

4.3 The future of the referendum

The interviews illustrate a clear tension between prioritizing a more sustainable development model—infill development rather than urban sprawl—and the protection of neighbourhood character. How can planners juggle these priorities, and what takes precedence? Is it possible for this decision to happen at the local level, or does it need to be at a regional scale? This scalar tension is far broader than Quebec’s municipalities, and

too large to resolve in this project alone. As mentioned by one respondent, the State of California is a notable example of overriding local governments to impose densification, under the pressure of a housing supply crisis (Reyes, 2024; Zheng et al., 2021).

It is possible that upcoming revisions to urban planning regulations will resolve this scalar tension. Though Quebec is not legally overriding local governments, the new provincial orientations are imposing density minimums that must be translated into metropolitan and regional plans. Through top-down requirements for the conformity of planning regulations, municipalities will be forced in some cases to update their urban plans to increase as-of-right developable capacity. These decisions are being made at a higher level of government, where decision-makers are more removed from their constituents. Indeed, the pressure on local officials is one of the consequences of increasing decentralization or the devolution of responsibilities within multi-level governance. Municipalities are the proximity government; they uniquely have frequent, legally mandated public facetime with their constituents in the form of public city council meetings and assemblies. If they maintain the status quo, they are preventing conflicts. However, when municipal decision-makers must bring in big changes, they do not have any distance from their citizens. In Montreal, boroughs can point to the central city government, but most other municipalities do not have another proximity government where they can redirect citizens' frustrations.

Ultimately, a fundamental ongoing debate is at the heart of the procedural questions surrounding the referendum process. The evolution of planning theory and practice over recent decades has led us to insist on participation and community building as the goal of planning, to the possible detriment of higher-level considerations. This framing also

includes the implicit belief that participation must be hyper-local, which excludes all perspectives outside of one geographic area. Indeed, municipalities are mandated to have public assemblies with their citizens, but no such process exists at the provincial level. The participatory trend has generally sought to address the ills of the autocratic master planning era by empowering community participation in planning. It may be perceived that moving away from a direct democracy approach such as the referendum is “going backwards” to the days of master planning. However, the referendum does not appear to be a truly participatory mechanism when considering its origins as a tool for private property owners, its design of mobilizing opposition rather than support, and unequitable participation as a result of a self-selected participation approach.

We must consider what a way forward would look like, where planning is both rooted in good ideals and accomplishes its concrete objectives. It can be helpful to look at some of the problem definitions from interview respondents and VRM attendees gathered in this study. A particular rationale for participation that stood out in both cases was rooted in the concept of legitimacy. In a context where some see declining trust in democratic institutions and a legitimization crisis for representative democracy (e.g. Inch, 2015), increased institutional participation can be framed as necessary for regaining public trust and confidence in the regime. In a deliberative (consensus-seeking) approach, some argued that public participation is necessary to build support for social change, such as tackling the climate crisis. If we understand the goal—to build trust in governance, or to seek consensus for policy actions—we can better design the solutions. Indeed, the referendum process may not be the best avenue to build public trust or seek consensus. Quebec already has a system of participatory institutions, such as community roundtables

(*tables de concertation*). Urban planning advisory committees (*comités consultatifs d'urbanisme*) are primarily composed of citizens, but could be adapted to increase public engagement and understanding of their functioning. Instead of the current consultation and referendum process being the key avenue for public input into decision-making, perhaps we should be focusing instead on strengthening upstream participatory institutions.

Chapter 5. Recommendations

This is an interesting time to be conducting this study, as the provincial working group on consultation and referendum approval (*chantier de travail en matière de consultation et d'approbation référendaire*) is currently underway. One year from the publication of this report, the referendum process might look very different if the results of this consultation have made it into law. However, if the reflections collected from interviews, the VRM event, and the interview with a MAMH employee are an indication of what is to come, these changes may focus on procedural rather than fundamental questions.

The recommendations that arise from the analysis are necessarily limited to some extent by the perspectives of those who participated in this study. Future research should apply complementary methods to further understand the extent of the problems facing local decision-makers in democratic contexts, and how to solve these ‘wicked problems’ facing participatory democracy.

5.1 Recommendations for referendum reform

Make participation in the referendum process more predictable by changing the catchment definition. Though procedural, this is the essential change that clearly needs to occur to create more logical and equitable participation boundaries. Either the

catchment is changed to a defined distance perimeter from the site, or at least the affected and contiguous zones form the voting area (rather than having zones opt-in through signing petitions). This can also be an opportunity to increase minimum participation thresholds to only have referendums in situations of significant opposition. By simplifying the geography, this can also help to simplify the process which is too complex for many to understand.

Streamline the three-stage referendum process. The current process is complex, confusing, and resource intensive. The stages to request a referendum and sign a register were added in the 1990s. This new process may have enabled municipalities to have more flexibility in modifying their regulations by reducing the chances of a referendum, but it also introduced a high degree of complexity to the process which creates barriers to equitable participation and makes it more challenging for planners to do their jobs.

Review and simplify the elements that are susceptible to referendum approval. With successive legislative reforms, the law is overly complicated with regards to what is and is not susceptible to the referendum process. Consider which elements are essential for public review, such as density increases beyond a certain proportion. Take into account where existing definitions can be abused, such as a very minor floor area increase being susceptible to referendum approval.

Gradually expand alternative consultation methods, while maintaining a referendum option for major policy changes. Begin with technical changes to the process that have broad consensus, notably the catchment definition for voter participation. Pilot referendum exemptions in predefined areas, such as transit-

proximate zones, before province-wide implementation. Ensure that any changes to reduce the referendum are accompanied with strengthened consultative methods, as suggested below.

5.2 Recommendations for municipalities

Create formal channels for supporters to express approval, not just opposition. Decide how to positively engage with concerned citizens rather than dismissing community concerns as NIMBYism. While exclusionary ideals can be at the core of some interventions at public consultations and assemblies, it may be that the concept of “NIMBYism” is leading to fundamentally negative perceptions of public participation. This may lead elected officials and staff to prefer to skip consultation entirely rather than engage residents in a productive and collaborative exercise.

Measure who usually shows up at participatory forums and the extent to which this participation is equitable and representative of the population. Expand the scope of whose voices are heard in planning processes. Reflect on how to hear from broader perspectives to better weigh hyper-local interests against wider social issues. Explore models of incorporating future generations into current participatory processes.

Test innovative participatory methods. Make use of online, written, and workshop-style consultation methods to hear from more residents. Focus particularly on proactively engaging underrepresented groups rather than relying on self-selected participation.

Deliberative polling, citizens' assemblies, and participatory budgeting are among many possible methods for engaging communities on complex housing policy decisions and neighbourhood development priorities.

Consider implementing escalating consultation requirements based on project scale and impact rather than one-size-fits-all approaches. By clearly defining the requirements for consultation, developers will have more certainty in their project timelines and citizens can be informed ahead of time on how they can participate.

Update urban plans and planning by-laws more proactively. The referendum only comes into play for project-specific proposals when they fall into discretionary rather than as-of-right zoning. When planning regulations are regularly updated, this generates opportunities for upstream public consultation. By establishing clear development priorities across the municipality rather than at the neighbourhood level, future conflicts can be mitigated if densification zones have already been defined.

Build coalition support for change. If consultation methods are changed or municipalities choose not to enact referendums, citizens may feel that their ability to participate in their local democracy is threatened. By engaging housing advocacy groups, community stakeholders, and other interest groups, municipalities can reassure citizens as well as learning from broader diversity of perspectives. Focus on demonstrating how reforms can improve rather than eliminate meaningful public input.

5.3 Recommendations for provincial government

Mandate (or encourage) diverse consultation formats rather than only traditional public assemblies. Planning law should only be expected to set the minimum standard, but by offering a strictly prescribed procedure at present, many municipal planning offices feel unable to do things differently. Consultations that offer written and online options for participation alongside traditional methods can reach more participants, generate more representative feedback, and may encourage supporters to participate rather than only opponents.

Consider how to create upstream opportunities for public participation in provincial and regional agenda-setting. There is a need to rebalance the weighing of hyper-local interests against top-down planning by engaging people in higher-level visioning and decision-making. The timing of consultation within the planning process is mandated by Quebec planning law, and therefore requires a provincial-level reflection on how to resituate consultation to move away from processes that privilege self-selected hyper-local participation.

Encourage responsive governance through formal feedback requirements while reducing administrative burden. Implement mandatory response requirements to public input without granting veto power. The *rapport de rétroaction* from the public participation policy is an effective element in an otherwise burdensome policy. By requiring municipalities to demonstrate their engagement with citizens'

concerns and ideas, this can bolster public trust in government without allowing citizens to veto proposals through referendums.

Address the public participation implications of changes to social housing funding programs. When social housing governance shifted from municipal to provincial jurisdiction with the PHAQ, this had implications for democratic participation and housing outcomes. Approval for social housing projects happens at the municipal level from a planning perspective but is always contingent on receiving funding. Financing is difficult to secure when approvals are uncertain, pressuring municipalities to fast-track social housing approvals and distancing decision-making from the public.

Provide funding, training, and consultation practices for municipalities. Where local planning offices and elected officials feel constrained by minimum consultation requirements, it can be challenging to conduct meaningful consultation. Particularly among smaller municipalities, there can be a lack of institutional capacity and resources for professionalized public participation. Standardized consultation protocols and toolkits can be developed that can be adapted to local contexts.

Institute a public arms-length consultation organization available to all municipalities. Cities such as Montreal and Longueuil have the resources—and the ongoing demand—to create such institutions, but smaller municipalities do not. There is a precedent in the environmental sector, with the Bureau of Environmental Public Hearings (BAPE, Bureau d’audiences publiques sur l’environnement). Private consulting firms are increasingly being hired to outsource public consultation, particularly in contentious contexts. These firms can do excellent work, but this means an increasing

amount of public expenditure flowing to the private sector for something that could exist at the provincial level. Nor do all municipalities have the resources to hire consultants. There is a clear benefit when local governments can bring in a neutral group to conduct transparent consultations.

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Appendix A: Certificate of Ethics Approval

McGill University
Research Ethics Board Office
www.mcgill.ca/research/research/human



CERTIFICATE OF ETHICS APPROVAL

REB File Number: 24-12-001
Project Title: Participatory democracy and residential development: Quebec's land use referendum process
Student Principal Investigator: Brenagh Rapoport
Department: Urban Planning, School of
Supervisor Name: Professor Richard Shearmur
Sponsor/Funding Agency (if applicable): Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada
Research Team (if applicable):

Name	Affiliation
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Approval Period:

FROM	TO
13-Jan-2025	12-Jan-2026

The *REB-1* reviewed and approved this project by Delegated review in accordance with the requirements of the McGill University Policy on the Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Human Participants and the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct For Research Involving Humans.

- * Approval is granted only for the research and purposes described.
- * The PI must inform the REB if there is a termination or interruption of their affiliation with the University. The McGill REB approval is no longer valid once the PI is no longer a student or employee.
- * An **Amendment** form must be used to submit any proposed modifications to the approved research. Modifications to the approved research must be reviewed and approved by the REB before they can be implemented. Changes to funding or adding new funding to a previously unfunded study must be submitted as an Amendment.
- * A **Continuing Review** form must be submitted before the above expiry date. Research cannot be conducted without a current ethics approval. Submit 2-3 weeks ahead of the expiry date.
- * A total of 5 renewals are permitted after which time a new application will need to be submitted.
- * A **Termination** form must be submitted to inform the REB when a project has been completed or terminated.
- * A **Reportable New Information** form must be submitted to report any unanticipated issues that may increase the risk level to participants or that may have other ethical implications or to report any protocol deviations that did not receive prior REB approval.
- * The REB must be promptly notified of any new information that may affect the welfare or consent of participants.
- * The REB must be notified of any suspension or cancellation imposed by a funding agency or regulatory body that is related to this study.
- * The REB must be notified of any findings that may have ethical implications or may affect the decision of the REB.

Appendix B: Interview guide (French)

1. En bref, quelle expérience avez-vous du processus d'approbation référendaire ?
 - a. Ce processus a-t-il été utilisé dans le cadre de projets auxquels vous avez participé, que ce soit à titre professionnel ou personnel ?
 - b. Si oui, quel a été le résultat (registre raté, scrutin tenu, ...) ?
2. Que sont les principaux moyens utilisés par votre municipalité ou arrondissement pour impliquer les citoyens dans la prise de décision ? Quel est le plus efficace ?
3. *(Facultative)* Quel niveau d'implication citoyenne pensez-vous utile ou nécessaire dans la prise de décision pour l'aménagement et l'urbanisme ?
4. Selon vous, le processus référendaire actuel (y compris la tenue du registre, les séances de consultation, etc.) pose-t-il des enjeux ou des obstacles :
 - a. À la participation citoyenne ?
 - b. À la réalisation de votre travail ?
5. Dans votre expérience, la participation citoyenne dans votre territoire (aux consultations, sondages, séances publiques, ...) est-elle habituellement représentative de la population ?
6. À la suite des nombreux changements législatifs apportés au référendum (notamment en 2017 et 2024), avez-vous constaté des changements dans votre travail ?
7. *(Facultative)* Pensez-vous que les niveaux supérieurs de gouvernement sont : trop, assez, ou pas assez impliqués dans la prise de décision pour l'aménagement de votre territoire, notamment en habitation ?
8. Comment voyez-vous l'avenir de l'approbation référendaire et de la participation citoyenne en urbanisme au Québec ?

Appendix C: Selected interview quotes (original French)

¹ « Une municipalité va jamais se rendre de nos jours à l'étape du scrutin référendaire. Il faut énormément de courage politique pour se rendre là, ce qui est pas tout le temps monnaie courante et il faut également beaucoup de moyens financiers. C'est extrêmement cher de se rendre à cette étape. Donc, en fait c'est très peu justifié, souvent de se rendre à cette étape-là. Faut vraiment que ce soit souvent un projet de société. »

² « Il y a des municipalités au Québec où il y a tellement de mobilisation, ça fait peur ... on est plus capable de gérer la ville. ... Souvent ma recommandation, c'est d'avoir des firmes de consultation publique pour travailler l'information pour plus avoir de la mauvaise information, mais ça coûte très cher et [pour des questions peu importantes] ... Ils ont pas les budgets pour toujours aller faire ça. »

³ « Définitivement les promoteurs sont allergiques à l'incertitude. Donc ils vont être réticent d'embarquer dans un processus sans savoir si à la fin, ils vont réussir leurs projets, donc c'est certain qu'ils vont faire tous les efforts nécessaires pour éviter [le referendum] puis proposer un projet conforme. »

⁴ « Sinon [le chantier de travail en matière de consultation et d'approbation référendaire] aurait été fait pour rien. »

⁵ « Aujourd’hui, force est de constater que la procédure est d’une lourdeur inouïe et d’une incompréhension pour 99,9% des professionnels, des élus et de la population. »

⁶ « On a eu récemment, ce n’était pas un projet susceptible d’approbation référendaire, mais c’était un projet de logement social dans [un quartier central de mon arrondissement]. Je pourrais t’envoyer le lien à la consultation publique. Les gens sont tout à fait contre, ils disent « Ah je suis contre la hauteur du projet. » Mais après ça, tu les entends parler, puis en fait ce sur quoi ils sont contre, c’est le fait que ça va être des logements sociaux. Donc ça c’est des situations qui se produisent de temps en temps, puis qui ne sont franchement pas très belle à voir. Ça ne fait pas sortir le meilleur. »

⁷ « C’est un processus d’opposition et non un processus pour soutenir un projet. Alors c’est un petit peu contraire à l’esprit même d’une participation publique. »

⁸ « Je vois pas comment on pourrait aller mobiliser un avis, une voie positive à un projet, déjà qu’on a de la misère à mobiliser les gens en général aux assemblées publiques de consultation. »

⁹ « La ville a adopté une vision de l’habitation ... l’objectif, c’est d’accélérer la construction de logement pour faire face à cette crise. ... Je pense que l’autre critique qu’on va avoir, c’est qu’avec ces processus, on fait un peu le contraire de ce qu’on fait les dernières années, où on faisait des consultations en amont, puis on essaie de prendre plus de temps pour les projets. Alors que la loi 31, c’est l’inverse, c’est vraiment aller très vite, une seule consultation publique. Donc je pense qu’en termes d’acceptabilité sociale, ça va

représenter un enjeu sur ce type de projet. Mais l'argument étant que c'est une crise du logement, donc il faut construire des logements rapidement, donc c'est ça l'argument de la ville et c'est pour ça que l'outil est fait. »

¹⁰ « Où on a des projets [immobiliers], c'est mon opinion, puis l'opinion de mes collègues, ici à l'interne, ... on voit aucune plus-value d'avoir une participation citoyenne plus élevée autre que d'avoir plus de [NIMBY]. Les assemblées publiques de consultation pour les projets immobiliers, c'est tout le temps, tout le temps, une, deux, cinq personnes ou un groupe qui représente des personnes qui vont s'opposer au projet pour leur propre bénéfice. Donc la plus-value de leur implication dans le processus est discutable. Elle est pas sur le fond, elle est vraiment sur l'impact sur leur propriété, leur bien, leur vue. »

¹¹ « Tout le monde est d'accord avec le développement écoresponsable, mais personne ne veut la densité autour d'eux. »

¹² « Le problème, c'est que des nouveaux projets comme ça, surtout à Montréal, c'est toujours en insertion urbaine. Puis à chaque fois, les gens ont peur du changement. C'est peut-être des changements qui sont nécessaires. Comme par exemple, on parle de la crise du logement, puis on dit, il faut construire, OK? Enfin, pour construire, il faut souvent viser des bâtiments plus denses que ce qu'il y a actuellement. Et bien un bâtiment plus dense à côté des gens que ça fait longtemps qu'ils habitent là, puis qui prennent pour acquis que les choses vont rester telles quelles. Mais c'est sûr que d'avoir un bâtiment plus gros arriver, ça génère une peur, puis une crainte qu'il va manquer de stationnement, que

ça va affecter l'ensoleillement, que y aura trop de monde. Mais ça se peut que ce projet-là soit dans l'intérêt public plus large, donc c'est difficile. C'est difficile de voir que des fois, quelques personnes qui habitent à côté d'un projet ont tout le pouvoir sur l'avenir de ce projet. »

¹³ « Dans mon territoire, 80 % des projets déposés par les promoteurs tombaient à l'échec faute à l'opposition. Maintenant qu'on a une politique de participation, c'est mieux. Mais malheureusement on a toujours un grand taux d'échec. »

¹⁴ « [Avec les processus de consultation] ça peut s'améliorer. Faut que les attentes des citoyens soient raisonnables, puis il faut que le promoteur soit prêt à faire des concessions. C'est un peu comme dans toute négociation. Puis la ville doit arbitrer là-dedans. Donc il y a peut-être certains projets, on pourrait regarder puis dire bon finalement ça a pas vraiment servi de, on a peut-être perdu plus de temps. Mais y en a d'autres, on peut dire qu'on a vu des améliorations là. »

¹⁵ « Ce qui fait que les projets sont souvent mauvais, en fait, c'est qu'on coupe dans le budget de construction, et cetera. Donc là plus on avance, plus ça traîne, moins il y a d'argent pour financer la construction du projet. Puis c'est là qu'on se met à commencer à couper dans les matériaux, on fait des interventions un peu moins, un peu plus banal, ce genre de choses-là. Fait c'est, à mon avis, on nuit à la qualité des projets, en faisant tout. »

¹⁶ « Admettons qu'un hôpital serait sujet à l'approbation référendaire. C'est un cas où les voisins, oui, la crainte soit légitime, mais peut-être que cet hôpital-là est absolument nécessaire pour une population de 500 000 personnes. Donc je trouve que l'approbation référendaire peut être difficile à justifier tout dépendant de la nature du projet, de sa taille aussi. Dans un très gros projet, ça peut donner trop de pouvoir à peu de personnes. Dans des petits projets ça peut nuire aussi. »

¹⁷ « C'est sûr qu'on a des architectes, des urbanistes, qui vont présenter le projet, puis voir certains aspects, mais c'est souvent qu'il y a pas vraiment de plus-value à ça. Puis dans une situation de crise du logement où on sait qu'on a un déficit d'offres par rapport à la demande, je trouve que y aurait moyen de se poser la question, est-ce que y a pas des aspects qu'on regarde qui devraient cesser de l'être. ... Je pense qu'on en rajoute tout le temps une couche parce qu'on veut toujours des projets qui sont meilleurs. Mais en bout de piste je suis pas sûr que la qualité des projets a augmenté plus qu'il faut en ajoutant toutes ces règles. »

¹⁸ « L'objectif des superpouvoirs est de diminuer les délais, puisque les promoteurs passaient leur temps en délais avec les villes. Et nous les urbanistes, prendre un an pour réfléchir sur un projet, pour un projet de 8-10 étages : on va vivre avec ce projet pour les 100 prochaines années. Je suis pas d'accord avec l'avis qu'il faut juste trouver un compromis rapide et aller d'avant. Si tu consulte, si tu fais les tables populaires, c'est

certain qu'éventuellement tu vas trouver un compromis avec le promoteur ainsi que la population. Mais ça prend du temps. »

¹⁹ « Ateliers activités ludiques, consultation des enfants. Ça aussi, je trouve ça super intéressant. Dernièrement, il y a une tendance qui émerge là de consulter les enfants, qui ont une connaissance incroyable de leur milieu, hein? Parce qu'eux, ils sont les plus vulnérables de la société en quelque part, hein? C'est des tout petits, donc ils voient le danger de certains aménagements plus facilement que les adultes, ils sont souvent plus honnêtes aussi. Là aussi, il y a quelque chose, y a quelque chose d'intéressant dans la consultation plus large. »

²⁰ « On est quand même encadré, assez serrée par la loi, donc il y a toutes les procédures de consultation publique requises. Donc l'assemblée publique lorsque c'est requis. Sauf qu'on ne peut pas exiger vraiment plus que ce que la loi demande, par exemple pour tel projet versus un autre projet simplement. Parce qu'on doit traiter chaque demande de manière égale et équitable, donc on s'en tient beaucoup à ces aspects-là. »

²¹ « Antérieurement, il y avait un certain nombre d'unités qui étaient allouées à la ville. Puis la ville gérait [l'attribution des] unités. Et puis aujourd'hui, c'est plus par appel de projets. La ville a un peu moins de contrôle là-dessus sur ces projets. ... Moi j'interviens quand il faut modifier le règlement d'urbanisme pour permettre ces projets, mais on le voit parce que c'est aussi quelque chose qui est très demandé, le logement social. On entend aussi beaucoup dans nos consultations que les gens ont l'impression qu'on

autorise vraiment plus des projets de promoteurs privés. Puis qu'ils voudraient plus de logements sociaux. Mais ça implique aussi que la ville a plus de marge de manœuvre. »

²² « Il y a eu beaucoup de changements, comme ces dernièrement dans les outils urbanistiques, dans l'approbation référendaire elle-même. C'est un contexte qui change vraiment beaucoup, puis c'est sur le fond de la crise du logement, donc tout le monde a un sentiment d'urgence. Tout le monde veut, on veut que les projets avancent. »

²³ « [L'opposition] est le but premier. Ça fait en sorte qu'entre, par exemple, la demande de soumission, la tenue du registre et le scrutin, si le vote d'opposition ne sort pas, ça veut dire qu'on peut remettre dans le fond le vote final strictement sur la ou les zones où le vote d'opposition a sorti. Fait que même à contrario une stratégie des fois, c'est de faire sortir les opposants. Non pas par son contre, mais pour s'assurer que mon bassin de votation à l'étape 2 et 3 soit plus large que strictement contrôlée dans les mains de citoyens qui appartiennent à une seule zone, donc ça va jusque-là. Alors voilà, c'est tout à fait contraire aux principes démocratiques, à mon sens. »

²⁴ « Le PPCMOI, il doit être conforme au plan d'urbanisme [contrairement au PL-31]. Ce qui à mon avis un genre d'idéal, c'est soit avoir un zonage qui permet d'aller chercher une plus-value dans tous les projets, qui répond aux orientations gouvernementales puis d'avoir un plan d'urbanisme, ce qui donne assez de marge de manœuvre pour faire des PPCMOI dans des situations d'exception qui vont aller chercher une plus-value, et cetera. »

²⁵ « La meilleure des solutions aurait été davantage de forcer les municipalités à revoir leur cadre réglementaire, puis à augmenter partout. »

²⁶ « On dit qu'il faut faire confiance aux élus, ben ça reste aux élus aussi à décider : dans ma municipalité puisque mes citoyens sont extrêmement mobilisés, je me dois de mettre en place davantage de ce que la loi me prescrit. La loi, ce qu'elle va prescrire, c'est la norme minimale générale qui devrait s'appliquer aux municipalités au Québec et non pas les exceptions. »