



# PORTRAIT OF THE EVOLUTION OF PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES IN SAGUENAY

**CO-DESIGNING  
THE ACTIVE  
CITY**



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## CONTEXT OF THE ANC'S SAGUENAY PROJECT

The Active Neighbourhoods Canada (ANC) project was launched in 2009 in response to the need for concerted action in Canadian cities to raise awareness of the links between the built environment and public health. ANC is the result of a pan-Canadian collaboration between the Montreal Urban Ecology Centre (MUEC), the Centre for Active Transportation and the Sustainable Calgary Society. The ANC team works together to develop, lead, improve and share innovative approaches to collectively designing green, active and healthy neighbourhoods. The ANC project is part of the Public Health Agency of Canada's Innovation Strategy (IS) aimed at achieving healthy weights in Canada's communities.

Since 2009, the ANC team has worked with 19 communities in Quebec, Ontario and Alberta to help design communities on a human scale, with public spaces and streets that foster health, physical activity and social connections.

The story of the Active Neighbourhoods Canada Saguenay project begins in Chicoutimi, a borough of the City of Saguenay, with the 2013 municipal election. At that time, the citizens of District 11 elected an independent municipal councillor, Simon-Olivier Côté, who promised to invite more citizen participation. The District 11 Council was established a year later. This consultative body allows residents, merchants and community organizations to participate in the City's investment decisions and to guide actions aimed at improving the district's living environment, in particular through a participatory budgeting process. Subsequent to this initiative, the MUEC, in partnership with EURÊKO!, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting environmental action in Saguenay, collaborated for the first time with the City of Saguenay. Since then, the MUEC has collaborated with Saguenay on various undertakings, including on the Traverse du Coteau project and on a master plan for parks and green spaces.

With the work of the ANC in Saguenay drawing to a close, the MUEC wished to sketch a portrait of the evolution of citizen participation practices in Saguenay in recent years in order to better understand the impact of the support received, the challenges encountered and future needs.

This review is based on the documentation available online (the City's website, newspaper articles, etc.) and supplemented by telephone exchanges with City professionals, a City councillor and community partners.

## PROJECTS CARRIED OUT BY THE ANC TEAM

### The Traverse du Coteau

Following the creation of the District 11 Council, it became clear that the community's priority was to make the neighbourhood more walkable and to improve high-risk intersections for active transportation users.

While identifying its work priorities, the council took an interest in the former Canadian National railway line, owned by the City of Saguenay, which runs through downtown Chicoutimi. The land had been partially developed as a pedestrian walkway that was already being used by many citizens. The idea of planning the development and enhancement of this pedestrian walkway, with the participation of citizens, who would thus be encouraged to embrace the site, became the main objective of the District 11 residents' council.

With the support of the MUEC, a linear park committee, the Comité du Parc linéaire (COPAL), was created, composed of representatives of City agencies, members of the District 11 residents' council, and representatives of local organizations, including EURÊKO! A few months later, the old railway line was renamed the Traverse du Coteau.

During the course of the project, a participatory process was developed in collaboration with EURÊKO!, COPAL and the MUEC. This process included participatory creative workshops, as well as a highly successful professional workshop bringing together some 15 participants from various departments of the City of Saguenay, the Ministère des Affaires municipales, the Ministère des Transports and the Cégep de Jonquière.

Between 2017 and 2018, the Traverse du Coteau took new shape thanks to tactical urbanism interventions and infrastructure work totalling expenditures of \$50,000. Among the improvements resulting from these investments were safer approaches to the walkway, redeveloped paths, tree plantings and the installation of street furniture (benches, garbage bins, street lamps, etc.).



## Impacts and benefits

As the first project to emerge from the District 11 Council, and the first intersectoral participatory process to be carried out, the Traverse du Coteau constituted a true laboratory for participatory democracy. The Traverse du Coteau project not only enabled safety and development issues specific to District 11 to be addressed, but also fostered the emergence of a new collaborative culture among local authorities. The benefits of this project were therefore multiple:

- Creation of an intersectoral linear park committee (COPAL) mandated to monitor the project;
- Increased awareness among professionals from different disciplines about ways of working collaboratively on integrated solutions;
- Democratization and sustainability of participatory processes ensured by the creation of precedents that served as the basis for development of the new public participation policy;
- Development projects and enhancements carried out within a rather short time period;
- Increased safety of pedestrian crossings and approaches to the Traverse du Coteau;
- Capacity building and skills transfer among local partners.

**Partners:** Les verts boisés du Fjord, Éco-kartier centre-ville de Chicoutimi, the City of Saguenay, EURÊKO!, Cadus, District 11 Council



## Master plan for parks and green spaces

Following the success of the first phase of the ANC project, local partners and the MUEC were eager to continue working together to consolidate, perpetuate and increase the scope of participatory processes and city-wide interventions. At the same time, Saguenay decided to undertake the revision of its planning documents, starting with its land use and development plan, in order to improve the planning and management of its territory.

In conjunction with this, the City undertook to produce a master plan for parks and green spaces, the Plan directeur des parcs et espaces verts (PDPEV), with the aim of identifying, analyzing and consolidating its supply of parks and green spaces. Intended to support decision-making, this document aims to direct the prioritization of interventions and promote the coherent development of all parks over the next fifteen years.

The MUEC and EURÊKO! were mandated to support the City in carrying out a participatory process aimed at consulting the community about uses, needs and priorities for the supply of parks. As part of this participatory approach, 70 online surveys were compiled and workshops with elected officials, professionals, key stakeholders and residents were organized.



## Impacts and benefits

- Inventory, analysis and evaluation of the supply of parks and green spaces in Saguenay;
- Development of selection criteria for the development of new parks;
- Development of guidelines and planning tools in collaboration with the community;
- Development of participatory processes to validate new park projects or redevelopment work with the community;
- Implementation of a participatory approach in collaboration with local stakeholders and city professionals.

**Partners:** EURÊKO!, City of Saguenay

# PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES IN SAGUENAY

Over the past decade, a multitude of participatory projects have emerged in Saguenay. The implementation of these processes signals important changes within both the administration and the local community.

## District Council and participatory budget

Initiated by Councillor Simon Olivier Côté, the District Council was the very first such entity to be established in Saguenay. This approach stems from the desire to create a new model of participatory democracy that promotes greater involvement of the population in decision-making processes. Composed of citizens, merchants and local organizations, the District Council's mandate is to discuss community challenges, search for possible solutions and carry out actions that address local issues. Initially, this was made possible by means of a participatory budget drawn from the municipal councillor's discretionary fund. Today, the District Council is composed of working committees focused on specific topics and funding is sourced according to the nature of proposed projects. Despite the success of this approach, the District Council remains the only entity of its kind in Saguenay.

## Guide to participatory democracy

Following the success of the District Council's initiatives and projects, EURÊKO! launched a publication on participatory processes entitled "Guide de démocratie participative : un modèle d'intervention pour Saguenay" (guide to participatory democracy: an intervention model for Saguenay). Based on the MUEC's participatory urban planning approach and supported by the District Council, this document proposes tools for implementing participatory processes through the creation of district councils and the use of a participatory budget.



Photo credit : EURÊKO!

## Bâtissons Saguenay Platform



In an effort to consolidate information relating to participatory projects, the City of Saguenay created Bâtissons Saguenay, a web platform that makes it possible to monitor the evolution of projects on the internet and stay informed of their progress. This platform consolidates information on a single communication channel and collects citizens' suggestions concerning the City's future actions.

## Impacts and benefits

- Extension and development of new participatory practices among partners and the local population;
- Development of tools and transfer of skills related to participatory approaches;
- Emergence of multi-sectoral collaborations.

**Partners:** EURÊKO!, City of Saguenay

## Consultations on the future of the Chicoutimi borough's railway zone

Located on the banks of the Saguenay River, between Riverin Boulevard and Lafontaine Boulevard, the former railway zone is currently occupied by a multi-storey parking lot that will reach its end of life by 2022. The City wishes to repurpose this site, which has interesting development potential due to its proximity to the downtown area. In the summer of 2019, Saguenay initiated a consultation process including an online questionnaire, targeted meetings with stakeholders, the formation of a multi-stakeholder committee to guide the consultation process, and a call for ideas on the Bâtissons Saguenay platform.

In the fall of 2019, the members of Chicoutimi's borough council advanced a proposal for the development of a multi-functional neighbourhood project including a new multi-storey parking lot, a residential sector, an amphitheatre, and an ecomobility corridor. This scenario constitutes a hybrid project that integrates the best proposals arising from the consultation and the administration's objectives.

## Consultation on the revision of the land use and development plan

In the spring of 2019, the City of Saguenay initiated the revision of its land use and development plan, in effect since 2011. The goal of this process was to develop an updated global vision of the cultural, economic, social and environmental development of Saguenay, driven by a spirit of sustainable development and informed by the concerns of citizens.

Saguenay therefore initiated a public participatory process entitled "Saguenay 2035" with the aim of involving and consulting citizens, businesses, and partners on its territory, upstream of the revision process. To this end, the City conducted online surveys, three workshops for the general public, focus groups with merchants, and corporate and institutional partners, and a participatory workshop with a citizen control committee.

These activities led to the emergence of a strategic vision that was adopted by the municipal council in July 2019. In the following months, the urban plan and urban regulations were adjusted to reflect the newly chartered guidelines.

## Consultations on development of a sports policy

In September 2019, the City of Saguenay's arenas and sports division conducted a consultation on sports and outdoor recreation in partnership with local stakeholders (universities, school boards, health and social services centres, sports associations, etc.). The goal of this process was to bring together the community engaged in the implementation of sports and leisure activities to gain an overview of the City's sports activities and infrastructure. The arenas and sports division organized a series of participatory activities, between September 2019 and April 2020, with the aim of consulting and involving local partners. In particular, it carried out a sports and outdoor recreation panel discussion, preparatory work meetings with local partners, participatory workshops with local stakeholders focused on 9 themes, and creative workshops for considering possible solutions.

Among the aims of this participatory approach are to develop a shared vision of available facilities and activities, to formulate recommendations and to collaboratively develop a sports policy by October 2020.

## Development of a citizen participation policy for Saguenay

In the fall of 2019, the City of Saguenay began the process of developing a new citizen participation policy for adoption before the next elections. To this end, it mandated the firm Environnement et société to conduct an examination of current public participation practices in the City of Saguenay. This initiative will enable the consolidation and standardization of procedures for carrying out participatory processes. Participatory activities have been planned so the population can be consulted, but the details related to this process are not yet known.

# PARTNERS' VIEWS ON THE EVOLUTION OF PARTICIPATORY PROCESSES IN THE REGION

Photo credit: MUEC



As part of this review, we met with our local partners from the political, municipal and community sectors to discuss their experiences with various participatory processes. This exercise led to a better understanding of how citizen participation has evolved and to the identification of issues specific to certain activity sectors. Although this is not an exhaustive review, it nonetheless made it possible to identify the challenges involved in implementing citizen participation in Saguenay.

## Policy context

With regard to the policy context, the findings are similar: huge progress has been made with respect to participatory democracy. We are seeing record activity levels on the Bâtissons Saguenay platform, reaching 3,000 interactions for certain topics. Considering that just a few years ago Saguenay was starting from scratch and that today it is developing a citizen participation policy, the progress is significant. Since the establishment of the District Council, which paved the way for the development of citizen participation practices in Saguenay, several other initiatives have sprung up. The experience gained through the Council has made it possible to test certain approaches, to identify successful practices and to develop tools that are better adapted to the local context. Since the Council's inception, new collaborative proclivities have developed among professionals and partners. A paradigm shift is emerging, but this requires time and adjustments.

Although significant progress has been made with respect to participatory democracy, it is nonetheless crucial to enlist the political sector's support for this type of approach, since it is elected officials who can guide and potentially finance participatory approaches. Without their support, it is difficult to predict the scope of participatory processes and to determine how their results will be applied. Given that the current administration

is supportive of this type of practice, it is necessary to develop a regulatory framework that will ensure the sustainability of participatory processes.

## Professional context

We spoke with City of Saguenay professionals from various municipal departments about their experience with participatory approaches. Although the contexts differed, the findings were similar: citizen participation is a relatively new practice which still enjoys little support in some divisions. Looking back over the last ten years, with the exception of legal obligations to consult the population when changes are made to certain planning documents, few participatory processes have been instituted. Only in recent years have we seen the emergence of participatory approaches in most of the City's divisions.

In addition, it should be noted that, currently, professionals must themselves conduct participatory processes, and collect and analyze data. This adds to workloads and impedes the adoption of such an approach. The absence of a standard approach to implementing participatory processes was also mentioned, as well as the need to be better equipped to carry out participatory activities related to issues that may generate animosity within certain communities (environmental, territorial, and economic issues, etc.).

At the same time, there is a desire to implement standardized consultative processes within the current administration, notably by means of the Bâtissons Saguenay platform and through development of a citizen participation policy. Thus, local government can be seen to be transitioning toward the implementation of participatory approaches, but this transition will require adjustments tied to the availability of tools and personnel.

## Community context

Recall that in the community little was known about citizen participation barely fifteen years ago. Thus, the practice has evolved considerably. Formerly, there appeared to be resistance to the emergence of new practices and to participatory democracy in general. Participatory approaches were therefore slow to be implemented in Saguenay, as compared to other major cities in Quebec. It is only in recent years that the community has opened up to this type of practice. The change is a welcome one, and civil society actors are ready to play their part in shifting the paradigm. In June 2019, under the impetus of ANC and EURÊKO!, some thirty community stakeholders gathered for an initial summit on participatory democracy in Saguenay.

# LESSONS DRAWN FROM THE PROJECT

Photo credit : MUEC



In July 2018, the Government of Quebec passed Bill 122 which recognizes municipalities as local governments. This measure gives more autonomy and decision-making power to municipalities and RCMs with respect to land use planning, economic development, transparency and information for citizens, finance and taxation, and the governance of their territory.

This context, which fosters the emergence and implementation of democratic processes, has allowed several municipalities such as Saguenay to review their priorities and acquire regulatory tools enabling them to structure, guide, and implement a citizen participation process adapted to local territorial realities. However, establishing participatory processes entails a period of learning and adjustment as knowledge gained from previous experiences is applied. During our interviews with Saguenay's partners, certain observations stemming from their professional experiences emerged.

## Emergence of a new practice and a paradigm shift

Although citizen participation is a tool that many of our local partners have adopted, its implementation at the municipal level is still recent and constitutes an important paradigm shift in Saguenay. This means that procedures, benchmarks and tools have yet to be developed and incorporated into administrative structures. Changes in practices require time, professional training, convincing evidence of the benefits of an approach and adequate tools to facilitate the transition.

## Divergent realities and needs

Local partners' needs and realities related to participatory processes differ greatly depending on their area of expertise and their sector. Current participatory tools are sometimes unable to address territorial, economic and environmental issues affecting Saguenay since they are outcrops of provincial or even federal authority. Although consultations may be held when projects of this scope are implemented, Saguenay professionals must cope with pre-existing disputes and tensions within the community that can erupt at any moment during local consultations. It should also be noted that the needs of various municipal departments differ and tools adapted to the realities of each sector are required. For example, some issues generate more animosity and upheaval than others and require the use of crisis management tools.

## Challenges of citizen participation in Saguenay for the coming years

In the course of our exchanges with local partners, certain challenges emerged across the board, regardless of context. Of particular note was the need for guidelines relating to participatory approaches. It appears necessary to establish a framework for determining when, how and why the population should be consulted. It also seems important to propose a variety of processes designated for different intervention sectors, management tools, and reference sources, and to train staff to ensure knowledge transfer within divisions and associations.

Communication issues also emerged during discussions with partners. There is a need for greater transparency regarding the stages of implementation of cooperative projects. This is the case with the Bâtissons Saguenay site, where information can seem fragmented and disjointed, from one project to another.

In addition, the need to better inform the community upstream of participation processes was a challenge many mentioned. During consultations, participants were sometimes found to have opinions based on erroneous information, and time and energy were required to set things straight.

Finally, the implementation of a citizen participation policy will enable several of the issues local actors have faced in recent years to be addressed. However, in implementing this measure, a range of local and territorial realities will need to be taken into account if solutions are to be found for some of the challenges faced by the community.



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