

What We Learned by Doing Engagement Differently

Report of the Solid Waste Management Plan Independent Consultation and Engagement Panel

Prepared by Andrea Reimer, Chair, with input and support from panel members • August 11, 2026

Executive Summary

In 2020, Metro Vancouver went above and beyond provincial requirements by creating the Solid Waste Management Plan Independent Consultation and Engagement Panel to evaluate engagement on the update of the regional solid waste management plan. From pre-engagement testimony about what past processes had lacked, the Panel set three tests: transparency, multiple avenues to participate, and persistent innovation in reaching First Nations and equity-denied groups. It applied them at every phase over the six-year duration of engagement on the plan.

Measured against those tests, engagement on this plan represents a genuine step change from business-as-usual practice: transparency became auditable rather than asserted, participation grew in both breadth and return rates, communities that standard tools had never reached helped shape the plan, and the draft now before the Minister was demonstrably shaped by what was heard. The Panel's independent assessment is that consultation was robust and adequate. This report, a developmental evaluation, documents that judgment, the lessons learned along the way, and the Panel's recommendations for the plan monitoring process.

1. Purpose of This Report

In 2020, Metro Vancouver – through the Greater Vancouver Sewerage and Drainage District (GVS&DD) Board – established the Independent Consultation and Engagement Panel (the Panel) to advise staff and the Board on engagement for the update of the regional solid waste management plan, and to report at every phase on whether consultation was robust and adequate. The GVS&DD Board did this deliberately: while the provincial guidelines for solid waste management planning require a consultation plan and an advisory committee, the Board chose to go above and beyond that requirement by creating an independent, third-party body with a standing mandate to evaluate the engagement and provide direct critique to the Zero Waste Committee (ZWC), a standing committee of the GVS&DD Board.

Over the course of the last six years, the Panel has had seven members who collectively bring decades of experience in public engagement, governance, and community organizing from across the region. Through more than 30 Panel meetings, and with inputs ranging from Metro Vancouver staff to direct meetings with members of the public, advocacy and industry organizations, and institutions regarding the quality of engagement they were experiencing through the phases of the plan's development, we advised on the design of the engagement

program, observed its implementation at every phase and reported our findings publicly to the ZWC and the GVS&DD Board.

This report does not restate the engagement record. The submission package accompanying the draft plan contains full documentation: phase-by-phase engagement summaries, advisory committee minutes, feedback logs, and every written submission received. What this report offers is an independent judgment of what that engagement accomplished, why it matters to the decision before the Minister regarding approving the plan, and how the lessons the Panel has documented can be carried forward by Metro Vancouver and other local governments looking to improve the quality of engagement on solid waste planning and other areas.

The Panel was a novel and emergent approach and as a result this report is a developmental evaluation rather than a summative one: it speaks to how the engagement learned and adapted as it went, and provides insights into how both Metro Vancouver and the Province can carry that learning into what comes next. It also fulfills the commitment the Panel made when we presented our work to date to Minister Davidson in July 2025.

2. The Baseline, and the Three Tests We Set

The Panel's evaluation framework did not come from us. It came from individuals, organizations, institutions and those directly involved in the waste management industry.

In 2021, before formal engagement began, Metro Vancouver conducted a pre-engagement phase designed to ask a prior question: how should this engagement work? Participants told us plainly what previous processes had lacked. They asked for transparency about how input was used and the reasons for decisions. They asked that the purpose of engagement, and what was genuinely on the table, be clearly defined. They asked that the time of busy participants be respected, with focused and sector-specific ways to take part. And they asked Metro Vancouver to work harder to reach communities that conventional methods had not reached to that point.

The pre-engagement results also revealed the baseline in starker terms. Outreach to First Nations using standard tools (notification letters and a questionnaire) produced no questionnaire responses at all and very few general replies. However, one Nation's response — a request for capacity funding to even contemplate their involvement — was a signal that the barrier was not interest, but the design of the ask. This had a profound effect on how we advised on engagement with First Nations, but also with others who may have high interest but a combination of low capacity to engage on others' priorities, weak relations with local governments, and/or low trust in Metro Vancouver.

From this testimony the Panel established three tests, which we have applied at every phase since:

- **Transparency:** of both the process and the information used to inform it, including how input shaped decisions;

- **Multiple engagement avenues:** so that participants can “right-size” their involvement to their interest, stake, and capacity; and
- **Persistent innovation:** to engage First Nations and equity-denied groups, who historically have not been well engaged in solid waste planning in this region.

These tests are, in effect, the baseline inverted: each one names something participants told us business-as-usual engagement had failed to deliver in the past.

3. What This Process Improved Relative to the Baseline and Why This Matters

Measured against those tests, it is the Panel’s assessment that engagement on this plan represents a genuine step change from previous practice, and that staff have met or exceeded the tests at every phase. For each test, we set out below the problem participants named, how we watched staff iterate toward solving it as the process unfolded, and the Panel’s own assessment of the result.

Test 1: Transparency

The problem. Participants told us in pre-engagement that in previous processes they could not see how their input was used or the reasons for decisions. Input went in; a plan came out; the connection between the two was often murky. In addition, some industry and advocacy group participants wanted a clearer line of sight into the information staff was using to make recommendations.

How staff responded and iterated. From the first phase, staff reported not only what feedback was incorporated into the plan, but what was not incorporated and why, giving decision-makers and participants clear line of sight into how input was weighed. As engagement approached decision points and the perceived stakes rose, the practice deepened rather than retreated: when some participants questioned whether their views were being accurately represented, staff produced a red-lined version of the plan documenting where feedback had shaped the text, alongside the recommendations not adopted and the rationale for each.

When concerns about the recording of feedback persisted, the Panel itself became part of the transparency architecture: beginning in fall 2025, Panel members attended every meeting of the Public/Technical Advisory Committee (PTAC) and the Industry Advisory Committee (IAC) as a second set of eyes to ensure that staff reporting reflected the full range of discussion.

Finally, staff went to significant lengths to ensure that the information they were basing their analysis on was proactively available. When further background was sought, staff met with those seeking it to clarify the exact information needed and did their best to provide it, noting that in some cases this wasn’t possible due to legal restrictions (i.e., contractual obligations to third parties).

The Panel’s assessment. We did not observe a single instance where staff failed to record feedback diligently and accurately. Each escalation in transparency was a response to a real

concern, made in public, at cost to staff time, and evidenced a pattern of an organization treating transparency as an obligation, not a communications strategy.

"In my experience participating in and evaluating stakeholder engagement processes, I have not previously encountered an approach that provided this level of transparency regarding how feedback influenced a final plan. By clearly demonstrating what input was incorporated, and explaining why other recommendations were not adopted, Metro Vancouver showed stakeholders that their contributions were not only heard, but genuinely considered."

— Celena Benndorf, Panel Member

Test 2: Right-sizing participation avenues

The problem. Participants in pre-engagement told us that they felt that previous engagement processes offered one door; whoever could not fit through it stayed outside. They asked that their time be respected, that the purpose and limits of each engagement be clear, and that there be focused, sector-specific ways to take part. After some discussion about this finding, the Panel observed that staff's instinctive response to a lack of people showing up was to use more of the same tactics. In previous engagements this had led to burnout for the most engaged and continued to fail at attracting new participants.

How staff responded and iterated. The menu of ways to participate grew with every phase, including questionnaires and community events for broad input; workshops and webinars for deeper discussion; standing advisory committees — formed in 2022 with a recruitment process redesigned around participation supports — for sustained involvement; tailored strategies for waste-generating industries such as tourism and hospitality; and, at the end of every phase and prior to the final report going to the ZWC and GVS&DD Board, the opportunity for any participant to present directly to this Panel about the process itself. Participation grew from 335 questionnaire responses in pre-engagement to more than 1,400 across the process, alongside over 60 advisory committee meetings and thousands of conversations at community events.

The Panel's assessment. The measure we weigh most heavily is not the totals but the returns: participants and organizations came back, phase after phase, across a six-year process. People return when their participation is worthwhile. The result is a draft plan that reflects a far greater range of people, communities, and interests than any previous Metro Vancouver plan.

"Having been a member of the Engagement Panel from the inception ... I was and remain impressed with our ability to engage with broad, diverse individuals and organizations and it is without hesitation that I say this process has been the most transparent and open that I have in my previous experience ever seen. ... This approach to engagement can serve as a model for future initiatives."

— Peter Fassbender, Panel Member

Test 3: Persistent innovation in reaching First Nations and other equity-denied groups

The problem. A key concern of the GVS&DD Board when it established the Panel was that First Nations and other equity-denied groups have historically not been well engaged in solid waste planning in this region, and pre-engagement proved the point, when standard notification tools produced no questionnaire responses from First Nations at all. The barrier was not interest; it was capacity, weak relationships, and low trust.

How staff responded and iterated. Rather than repeating the standard approach with more volume, staff redesigned the ask in a few key ways that made a huge difference.

With First Nations, Metro Vancouver moved to funded, relationship-based engagement, resulting in participation that Nations themselves have shaped as relevant and mutually beneficial. Meeting the Nations where they are at, rather than insisting they join a larger process that may not meet their needs or interest, is an important developmental step for Metro Vancouver.

The Collaborative Engagement program funded and resourced 23 not-for-profit organizations to engage their own networks, reaching more than 3,000 residents who would otherwise not have been aware of, or able to access, the process, and the program was refined over three successive phases as staff learned what participating organizations needed.

Recruitment for the mandated advisory committee was rebuilt to remove barriers, including offering meeting compensation, transportation, childcare, and technology supports available alongside targeted recruitment of underrepresented communities.

The Panel's assessment. The relational capital built here is an asset the region did not have in 2020. It is arguably the most durable product of the entire engagement process, and the one that would have been impossible under business-as-usual practice. These gains are not distinct but rather feed each other. The long process of building relationships through actions like the Collaborative Engagement program can make it much easier to build a diverse advisory committee in the next plan update, for example.

"What went exceptionally well was the diversity of perspectives brought into the process, the intentional focus staff placed on engaging communities that have historically been left out of conversations that directly affect them, and the effort to meet people where they are. To me, the Collaborative Engagement Program is the highlight of the plan update, and I hope it becomes a model for future engagement initiatives, both within Metro Vancouver and beyond."

— Komal Fatima, Panel Member and PTAC Member

Why This Matters

For the approval decision

The Environmental Management Act asks whether consultation on this plan was adequate. The Panel's answer is yes, and we offer this assessment as an independent body that watched the process from design through implementation, with a standing invitation for any participant to tell us otherwise.

Most importantly for the decision before the Minister: the engagement moved the plan itself. The draft submitted for approval was changed by what was heard, in a number of ways: a strategic principle prioritizing local solid waste solutions, sector-specific targets, strengthened actions for newcomers and multilingual communities, and new commitments to financial transparency and reporting all entered the plan through engagement. This was consultation with consequence, not consultation as ceremony.

We are equally direct about what adequacy does not mean: it does not mean unanimity. A small number of participants, most with direct financial interests in plan outcomes, remain dissatisfied not because their views went unheard, but because the plan did not adopt them. The record shows their positions were accurately documented (a record this Panel verified in person), substantively answered, and placed before decision-makers with reasons as to why they weren't recommended. That is what consultation looks like when interests genuinely conflict and the difference isn't resolved by more or better engagement but by an elected body making a policy choice.

Not all frustration with the engagement process is related to direct financial interest though, and some of this latter type of disagreement may be avoidable in future engagement design. Specifically, some advisory committee members joined mid-process without a clear discussion of their respective committee's scope and/or of where decision-making authority ultimately rested. This led to some assumptions about having more mandate than an advisory body carries. When that expectation went unmet, it contributed to a perception among some participants that the advisory process was largely cosmetic. The Panel does not share that assessment, and the record of IAC and PTAC feedback visibly shaping the plan says otherwise, but the perception was real and avoidable, and its lesson is addressed in our reflections below.

For the plan's legitimacy

A plan that will guide the region for a decade carries the legitimacy of the process that produced it. This one rests on the broadest engagement foundation of any solid waste services planning engagement in Metro Vancouver's history and on relationships, particularly with First Nations and equity-denied communities, that did not exist when the process began.

4. Reflections and How to Carry the Learning Forward

"The process demonstrated patience, expertise, and a genuine commitment to listening, with clear evidence that input was considered and reflected as the plan evolved. One consideration for future planning is to remain clear about the purpose and limits of each engagement opportunity, so that expectations are well managed and collaboration continues to add value without creating unnecessary complexity."

— Ryan Williams, Panel Member

The Panel offers six reflections, each earned from a real difficulty in this process, and one recommendation.

- **Match formats to participants.** Deliberative formats did not serve, and were not served by, a small number of participants who came in with strong, fixed positions and in most cases financial stakes in outcomes. Future processes should offer a dedicated advocacy and bilateral stream for such participants, alongside deliberative streams for others, with expectations about staff's role set clearly at the outset in relation to each stream. Put simply, if participants are there to advocate one position to the exclusion of the consideration of other positions, it's not well-suited to deliberative dialogue but is a legitimate part of overall engagement.
- **Set the mandate at the door for each new participant.** Some of the frustration observed in this process stemmed not from disagreement with outcomes but from uneven expectations about advisory committee mandates. Regardless of when they join an advisory committee, new members should be onboarded with a clear, documented account of each committee's role, how member input will be used, and where decision-making authority ultimately rests. This needs to be established for every member at their start, and re-established if there is any evidence that individual or group expectations have drifted.
- **Allocate more time at the end of an engagement process, not less.** Regardless of the specific approaches, good engagement follows a particular pattern, and the final phases of a process are focused on building shared understanding across divergent views and converging on options. These phases are the most demanding for participants but often get the least time, while earlier phases, which involve option generation and thus less choice friction, get ample time which is often even further extended as a result of the sense of time spaciousness at the beginning of an engagement. However, of all the phases, compressed timelines in the final one reduce accessibility for all but the most engaged. Processes should budget time accordingly and be mindful of this dynamic at the outset.
- **Signal engagement windows in advance.** Distinct from how much time each phase gets is whether participants can see it coming. Groups engaged more fully, and felt better heard, when they had advance notice of when windows to engage would open. It let organizations prepare their communities rather than scramble to respond, and it mattered most for those

with the least capacity to mobilize quickly. Publishing the engagement calendar early is a low-cost practice with a high return in both participation and trust, and the schedule can be updated if shifts become necessary.

- **Build tools that carry agreements across a long process.** Over multiple years, participants struggle to recall commitments and shared agreements from earlier phases. This is another reason for making earlier phases of an engagement shorter in favour of leaving appropriate time for agreement. In general this was a long process in part because of the significant disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic. Future processes would benefit from being shorter overall, or at the least investing deliberately in bringing participants back to what was agreed in earlier phases rather than assuming that level of understanding at the outset of subsequent phases.
- **Keep the network engaged.** The relationships built here will either compound or dissipate. Engaging this network in plan implementation will improve the implementation and save the region significant time and cost in future planning. A fuller explanation of what this might mean for monitoring and implementing the plan is included below.

Recommendations for the plan monitoring process

Provincial guidelines recommend a plan monitoring process once the plan is approved, and Metro Vancouver staff have asked for the Panel's advice on what the design of such a process might look like. Drawing on six years of watching how engagement structures work — and occasionally strain — in relation to Metro Vancouver's solid waste management function, the Panel offers the following:

Considerations for Establishing the Membership

- **Pick the purpose and then fit the membership to it.** The Panel discussed two legitimate models and felt it is ultimately a matter for elected officials at Metro Vancouver to decide the approach. One potential model is a small technical body that monitors the substance of implementation itself. However, this requires expertise in solid waste management that is neither common nor easily developed in lay participants. The other is a process-assurance body whose members do not do the technical analysis, but verify that commitments are being kept and that the right expertise is being engaged, with technical and public feedback flowing through other avenues. Either can work; a committee asked to be both will do neither well, and the choice determines the size, expertise and terms of reference of everything that follows. A caution that under either model, the IAC is not the answer. While the IAC will continue to exist for the reasons it was originally established and its members hold deep technical expertise, asking it to also monitor the plan would hamper both its ongoing purpose and the monitoring.
- **Be deliberate about placement and independence.** A monitoring body created by, and reporting to, the board whose plan it monitors will face the same independence questions this Panel was created to answer. The design should settle who the monitoring body answers to, and as a result whether it needs an independent reference body, before it settles who sits on it.

- **Avoid overlapping membership.** Where the same individuals sit on multiple committees, discussions turn circular, with the same perspectives repeated across different spaces and less dominant voices are crowded out. Membership should be designed for distinct contributions across bodies, not redundancy.

Considerations for How the Committee Operates

- **Set the tone in the structure.** The committee's purpose is to monitor, not maneuver. Clear conflict-of-interest statements and disclosure requirements – documented, public, and applied to all committees equally, where in this plan development process they existed for the IAC but not the PTAC – established at the outset, will do more to protect its credibility than any amount of after-the-fact management, a lesson drawn directly from the Panel's observation of some of the issues the PTAC struggled with in this process.
- **Invest in participants' capacity, not just their presence.** An annual session with a trained facilitator on engaging productively with opposing perspectives in high-stakes settings would strengthen committee members' ability to work across entrenched differences and is a meaningful return to people contributing their time and expertise.

Considerations for Other Monitoring Avenues

- **Keep ongoing feedback channels open.** A monitoring body should not be the only door through which feedback on implementation can be provided. Ongoing opportunities for the public and institutions to provide feedback between formal reviews will keep the plan accountable to the people and institutions it serves, not only to its indicators.
- **Build on the work with First Nations.** It's taken time and effort to build relationships with local First Nations such that a mutually beneficial conversation on solid waste management can take place. Building on this through implementation, and potentially monitoring, is a critical next step to ensure meaningful participation in the development of future solid waste management plans.
- **Sustain the momentum of Collaborative Engagement.** The Collaborative Engagement model should continue through implementation, targeted to the sectors this process identified as unlikely to be reached without it. The network exists; sustaining it costs far less than rebuilding it.

One more recommendation

The independent panel model proved its value on this plan, and Metro Vancouver should consider an independent engagement panel model for all of its major plans. In addition, the provincial government should consider the independent panel model in provincial guidance for solid waste management planning and for major public planning processes generally. The model is inexpensive relative to the value it produces: independent verification of the engagement record, a public accountability channel for participants, and a credible basis for the adequacy finding the Minister must make. It is already spreading on its own. Several Metro Vancouver Board members have indicated a keen interest in adopting practices from this

process, such as the transparent treatment of unadopted feedback, in their own municipalities. Provincial guidance could turn a local innovation into a public-sector standard.

“Engaging voices who aren’t typically part of engagement processes takes intention, work, being highly responsive and practicing honesty & transparency. This process was all of those things. Having been a part of this process from its inception, I believe it’s a testament to what is possible with staff dedication and having the right people around the table to not only shape the process but also listen and respond. I hope the impact and learnings from this process can inspire and shape future ambitious, meaningful engagement processes.”

— Veronika Bylicki, Panel Member

5. The Panel’s Conclusion

The Panel was created to answer one question on behalf of the public: was engagement on this plan robust and adequate? Having applied the three tests participants themselves gave us at every phase, over six years, with the door open throughout to anyone who wished to tell us otherwise, our answer is yes, and more than yes: this process demonstrates what public engagement can accomplish when it is designed against an honest account of past practice, independently overseen and welcoming of independent advice, and resourced to reach the people it previously missed.

It has been a privilege to serve. We thank the participants who trusted the process enough to test it, the staff whose work met that test, and the Board that chose to be watched.

Andrea Reimer, Chair • Celena Benndorf • Cheryl Brooks • Komal Fatima • Peter Fassbender • Ryan Williams • Veronika Bylicki