

What can deliberative mini-publics contribute to democratic systems?

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Abstract. Can deliberative mini-publics contribute to deepening the democratic dimensions of electoral democracies? The question is framed in this article using a problem-based approach to democratic theory—to count as democratic, political systems must accomplish three basic functions related to inclusion, communication and deliberation, and decision making. This approach is elaborated with an analysis of a real-world case: a deliberative mini-public with a citizens’ assembly design, focused on urban planning convened in Vancouver, Canada. This example was chosen because the context was one in which the city’s legacy institutions of representative democracy had significant democratic deficits in all three areas, *and* the mini-public was a direct response to these deficits. It was found that Vancouver’s deliberative mini-public helped policy makers, activists and affected residents move a stalemated planning process forward, and did so in ways that improved the democratic performance of the political system. Depending on when and how they are sequenced into democratic processes, deliberative mini-publics can supplement existing legacy institutions and practices to deepen their democratic performance.

Keywords: democracy; deliberation; mini-publics; democratic innovations; deliberative democracy; democratic systems

Introduction

Policy makers are increasingly interested in using deliberative mini-publics as a way of including citizens in political decision making (Smith 2009: 1). While deliberative mini-publics are increasingly studied, their integration into established institutions of representative democracy is less well understood. What contributions can deliberative mini-publics make to democratic systems? And how do deliberative mini-publics fit in with or supplement the legacy institutions of representative democracy?

Deliberative mini-publics are groups of 20 to 200 or more citizens tasked with learning, deliberating and advising or deciding on a policy or issue. Participants are selected through random or stratified sampling in such a way that they are descriptively representative of the public affected by the issue. When the tasks are well-defined and the process well-organised, learning and deliberation tend to be of high quality and the body will usually produce actionable recommendations. In those few cases in which the public reception of deliberative mini-publics has been studied, surveys suggest that citizens view these processes as credible and trustworthy (Warren & Gastil 2015). Because of these attributes, many enthusiastically endorse the use of deliberative mini-publics as a way of integrating ordinary citizens into political decision making (Beauvais 2015; Grönlund et al. 2014; Warren & Pearse 2008). But the enthusiasm is not unanimous. Curato and Böker (2016: 174) warn that deliberative mini-publics often vary widely in their quality, making it risky to generalise

about their contributions to a political systems' 'deliberative capacity'. Others go further, arguing that mini-publics can actually undermine a polity's deliberative capacities. Lafont (2015), for example, suggests that deliberative mini-publics displace or circumvent broader public deliberation because they include relatively few individuals.

These kinds of questions about the roles of deliberative mini-publics in representative democracies suggest that we need a more closely theorised approach. While most studies of mini-publics focus on the internal deliberative quality of such forums (MacMillan 2010; Smith 2009), or the ways in which they contribute to the deliberative capacities of 'deliberative systems' (Curato & Böker 2016; Mansbridge et al. 2012; Niemeyer 2014), we adopt a problem-based approach to democratic theory to frame our broader inquiry into how mini-publics might contribute to the democratic qualities of representative political systems (Warren 2017). The problem-based approach identifies three basic problems of democracy that political systems must solve to count as 'democratic': (1) they should empower inclusions of those potentially affected; (2) they should involve deliberation and communication so that issues are well-understood and choices are clear; and (3) they need capacities to decide, so that a people can collectively regulate their affairs and provide for themselves.

In principle, we can use this kind of problem-based democratic theory both to identify democratic deficits within political systems and to assess political innovations that potentially respond to deficits, including deliberative mini-publics. Democratic deficits can thus take the form of exclusion of those who should be included, failure of deliberativeness and communication, and failure of decision capacities (including political gridlock). We assess deliberative mini-publics by looking at their potential for addressing these kinds of democratic deficits. We elaborate our theoretical approach with a real-world case: a deliberative mini-public focused on urban planning convened in Vancouver, Canada. We focus on this example because the context was one in which the city's institutions of representative democracy had significant democratic deficits in all three areas, *and* the mini-public was a direct response to these deficits. The case thus provides an unusual opportunity to illustrate how deliberative mini-publics might supplement more traditional democratic institutions. Our primary goal in this article is to illustrate a problem area of democratic theory that is just beginning to be developed: How might democratic innovations, including deliberative mini-publics, interrelate with the legacy institutions of representative democracy (Lang & Warren 2012)? In particular, can deliberative mini-publics address democratic deficits within these institutions?

We begin by outlining the problem-driven approach to democratic theory and distinguishing it from the related deliberative systems approach. We then describe our approach to analysing the case of the Vancouver's Grandview-Woodland Citizens' Assembly (GWCA), which involved triangulating information from survey and census data, conversations with elites involved with the process, government reports and analysis of local institutions. After developing the case study, we describe the planning crisis that brought democratic deficits in inclusion, deliberation and communication as well as decision making to the fore and which resulted in a deliberative mini-public designed to respond to these deficits. We conclude with some observations about using deliberative mini-publics to deepen democracy.

Problem-based democratic theory

We frame the question as to what mini-publics might add to democratic systems using the problem-based approach to democratic theory developed by Warren (2017). In this approach, systems are ‘democratic’ to the extent that they solve three classes of problems. First, political systems should empower inclusions of those affected (especially the most affected) by potential collective decisions. The legacy institutions of democracy typically achieve inclusion through representation, particularly elected representation, based on residential jurisdictions. But inclusion, particularly of the kind not captured by electoral representation, can also be achieved through advocacy representation or descriptive representation, or it can be directly participatory. Second, consistent with deliberative democratic theory, political systems should have ways and means of communicating and deliberating among and between those included and their representatives. For the results of inclusion to be both legitimate and actionable, the views, values, interests and preferences that result from inclusive practices should be formed into common agendas and choices, justifiable by reasons. Where inclusions are achieved through representation, representatives should be communicatively linked to constituents, on the one hand, and to decision-making bodies, on the other. Third, inclusions and deliberation/communication need to feed through into actionable, legitimate decisions and the executive capacities necessary for implementing those decisions. Democracies need to get things done; a people must be able to provide collective goods for itself (Mansbridge & Martin 2013).

Like the problem-based approach we use to frame our analysis, the latest generation of deliberative democratic theory – the deliberative systems approach – also recognises that political systems in developed democracies are complex, with numerous sites of politics, multiple separations of functions that require coordination, and many points of pressure, entry and influence. While there are variants within the deliberative systems approach, the overarching idea is that deliberation takes place across a diverse range of interconnected forums and actors, and different forums and actors can be judged by how well they contribute to deliberative capacities of political systems (Curato & Böker 2016; Goodin 2005; Mansbridge et al. 2012; Niemeyer 2014; Parkinson 2012). Although deliberative mini-publics might, in principle, foster or undermine deliberation in the broader public sphere depending on their quality and their encompassing systems (Curato & Böker 2016), evidence suggests that they tend to enhance deliberative quality and make important contributions to deliberative systems (Bächtiger et al. 2014; Warren & Gastil 2015; Blais et al. 2008; Cutler et al. 2008; Warren & Pearse 2008; Beauvais & Bächtiger 2016; Knobloch & Gastil 2015; Smith 2009).

A limitation of the deliberative systems approach, however, is that it focuses thinking on one kind of ideal practice – deliberation – and then tends to over-extend claims, particularly democratic claims, about that practice. Owen and Smith (2015: 218) warn that over-extending the concept of ‘deliberation’ to include any discursive or political practice risks concept-stretching, and threatens to unleash deliberation from its ‘normative moorings’ in citizen capacities for the offering and receiving of reasons. They offer two alternatives. The first is to return to a more ‘citizen-centric’ approach to deliberative democracy, which involves evaluating systems as to how well they support what the authors term a “‘deliberative stance’”: a relation to others as equals engaged in the mutual exchange

of reasons oriented as if to reaching a shared practical judgment' (Owen & Smith 2015: 228). However, as John Dryzek (2017: 622) points out, it is unclear how the concept of a 'deliberative stance' should be operationalised, nor is it clear how individual-level attributes should be used to assess complex collectivities.

Owen and Smith's second suggestion – to reconceive of deliberation as an important feature of encompassing *democratic systems* – is the approach we adopt here. This idea, most thoroughly articulated in Warren's (2017) problem-based approach to democratic theory, returns the system question from *deliberative* democratic theory to *democratic* theory more broadly. Like deliberative systems accounts that judge the merits of deliberative mini-publics by how well they contribute to "functional imperatives" in the deliberative system' (Curato & Böker 2016: 176; see also Niemeyer 2014), we are interested in how generic political practices (including deliberation) organised into different institutions (including deliberative mini-publics) achieve democratic functions within political systems. The problem-based account frames broader questions by identifying three very general functions political systems must achieve to count as democratic, and then assesses a variety of democracy-relevant practices – not just deliberation but also voting, representing, protesting and so on – as ways and means of achieving these basic functions. The deliberative systems approach frames only one of these problems (communication and deliberation) by focusing on one important democratic practice (deliberation).

Here we are using the broader problem-based approach to ask how mini-publics might address three kinds of democratic deficits within an encompassing system comprised of electoral democracy and professional bureaucracies that answer to elected representatives. In particular, can mini-publics address deficits in the three problems a political system must 'solve' to count as democratic: inclusion, deliberation and communication, and collective decision making? We address this question with an analysis of one case of a relatively high-quality deliberative mini-public: the GWCA.

Methodology

To develop the case, we use a mixed-method approach, triangulating information appropriate to different levels of analysis. We use data and information about institutions, policies and census data on demographics to characterise Vancouver as a whole. We gathered information about intermediary units including Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood, neighbourhood activist groups and participants in the GWCA, using distributions of demographic information (from census or survey data) and distributions of attitudes and opinions (from surveys).

At the individual level of analysis, we both collected original survey data and used survey data collected by MASS LBP,¹ the independent public engagement firm hired by the City of Vancouver to organise the GWCA. In our surveys, we invited GWCA members to complete an online questionnaire to gain insight into their perceptions of and experiences with the process after their final Assembly meeting in May 2015. The response rate for our surveys was 71 per cent (34 out of 48 GWCA members completed our online surveys). Two high-level decision makers involved with the process – elected City Councillor Andrea Reimer and GWCA Chair Rachel Magnusson – also agreed to answer our questions on-record after the City of Vancouver ruled on the Assembly members' proposals in July 2016. Reimer

and Magnusson each spoke with the researchers for about ten minutes in semi-structured telephone conversations about their retrospective perceptions of the purpose of the GWCA, whether it was successful and what lessons could be learned.²

MASS LBP also conducted several surveys of individuals involved with the planning process before and after the citizens' assembly. Prior to the GWCA's creation, they surveyed Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood activists to gain insight into their demographic composition and their preferences for a new planning process. MASS LBP did not share this data with us, but they revealed their findings in a report (see Lyons 2014). After the GWCA was convened, its members met with members of the public in three roundtable meetings. MASS LBP administered paper questionnaires to participants at these public roundtable meetings in order to get feedback and they shared this data with us. We do not have precise response rates for the survey of roundtable participants, but MASS LBP officials reported that most participants completed feedback forms.

Vancouver: Three kinds of deficits

Following the precept that democratic theorists 'should widen their sources of inspiration' and synthesise normative and empirical study of democracy (Fung 2007: 456), we use a single case study of a deliberative mini-public within the City of Vancouver's political system to develop and illustrate the roles mini-publics might play within democratic systems. The case is both critical (Flyvberg 2006) and revelatory (Yin 2003). It is critical because it was a deliberately strategic response to deficits of inclusion, communication and deliberation, and decision making within a conventionally democratic system. Vancouver has a democratically elected Mayor and City Council, professional executive departments, generally well-run city services and numerous methods for policy-specific outreach to citizens. Viewed through the lens of a problem-based approach to democratic systems, the case illustrates common policy-specific democratic deficits in inclusion, deliberation and actionable decision making, and serves to test whether a well-organised deliberative mini-public can respond. The Vancouver case is also 'revelatory' (Yin 2003; see also Hendriks 2016) in the sense that this appears to be the first time municipal planners, with the support of elected officials, have deliberately used a deliberative mini-public to address democratic deficits rather than to fulfill (say) public engagement mandates, organise constituencies, or the many other reasons that mini-publics might be organised.

Democratic deficits do not always show themselves: smart, responsive political leaders and competent, hard-working professionals can make a city run smoothly without much popular influence or direction. 'Democracy' is necessary when there are deep conflicts and divisions; democratic deficits will tend to show up when the broad consensus that underwrites the functions of government breaks down (Warren 1996; Lang & Warren 2012). An instance of such breakdown occurred in Vancouver when the City Council released a document proposing 30-year planning directions for the neighbourhood of Grandview-Woodland – a neighbourhood with a diverse population of about 27,297 residents (City of Vancouver 2014: 9). Suspecting that developers had undue influence over building heights and density plans, neighbourhood activists mobilised against the city, effectively stalemating the planning process and threatening the 2014 re-election of the ruling coalition led by Vision Vancouver.

This planning crisis exposed deficits in all three democratic functions: inclusion, deliberation and communication, and decision making. With respect to inclusion, we can identify two more specific kinds of deficits – one following from electoral representation, and the other from policy-specific public participation. With respect to the first, elections should be highly inclusive in the sense that every eligible adult citizen has the right to vote, and each vote has the same weight (Dahl 1989; Setälä 2011). The design of electoral systems, however, affects the ways in which citizens are included or excluded (Warren 2009a). In Vancouver, the representatives who comprise the City Council are elected through a system known as ‘plurality at-large’ (or ‘block voting’), where each voter in the entire city casts one vote per available seat, and the candidates with the most votes win seats. While good for city-wide planning, this kind of system does not connect elected representatives to local constituencies such as neighbourhoods as well as, for example, the ward-based system, generating the first kind of inclusion deficit. Even if elected councillors happened to live in the Grandview-Woodland area, there is no accountability mechanism linking them to that neighbourhood, so voters cannot hold them accountable for unsatisfactory neighbourhood-level policies. The system’s lack of fine-grained territorial representation is somewhat like party-list proportional representation electoral systems, with large, multi-representative districts, but it lacks proportionality since block voting generates distortions of votes-to-seats much like single-member plurality (SMP) electoral systems. Like SMP systems, block voting’s distortion of votes-to-seats particularly excludes minorities, and can even exclude majorities by concentrating power in the hands of a plurality of voters’ representatives (Warren 2009a). A study of Canadian municipal politicians reveals that those in at-large electoral systems are less likely to perceive neighbourhood-level representation as being ‘very important’ as compared to municipal politicians in electoral systems (such as ward systems) that directly link neighbourhoods to representatives (Koop & Kraemer 2016).

Of course, electoral systems are generally weak in producing fine-grained, proximate responsiveness – we elect governments with general platforms, leaving the detailed political work to bureaucrats, who should be linked to citizens through policy-specific citizen engagement processes. Ideally, bureaucrats promote inclusion through participation, by creating opportunities for affected citizens to participate in articulating their needs and wants, and by communicatively linking grassroots political feedback up the chain of command to the senior bureaucrats who are accountable to city councillors. In our case, there is evidence that civil servants created opportunities for inclusion in drafting the initial set of planning guidelines for Grandview-Woodland. City planners initially engaged in fairly intensive community engagement, hosting not only open planning sessions for the public, but also focus groups to promote the inclusion of community members typically under-represented in self-selected processes, including indigenous and Chinese-language focus groups. It seems that during the initial phase of the first planning process – inclusion through participation – was achieved.

As the planning process developed, however, these neighbourhood-level inclusion mechanisms began to break down, revealing communication and deliberation deficits as well. Neighbourhood-level feedback – particularly as it related to the height of potential condominium developments – never made it to City Council. Nor did their voices even make it into the senior ranks of the planning bureaucracy. A letter from a former planner who was involved with this early process (and who resigned in protest; Garr 2015; O’Connor

2014) as well as documents eventually released through a Freedom of Information (FOI) Act request reveal that intervention by senior bureaucrats, particularly by the then new Managing Director of City Planning, prevented the community's feedback from making it into the initial draft of proposed neighbourhood policy directions (Campbell 2014). Thus, the City of Vancouver's (2013) first draft of the 'Grandview-Woodland Community Plan: Goals, Objectives, and Emerging Policies' failed to reflect either inclusions or communications from neighbourhood constituents, revealing, in effect, the extent to which inclusions were dependent upon the goodwill of bureaucrats rather than the empowerment of residents. The initial draft plan did, however, appear to neighbourhood activists to be responsive to developers as it included – most controversially – a proposal for transit-oriented density in what is otherwise a low-density area (City of Vancouver 2013; O'Connor 2014).

Not only were communication channels broken between citizens and decision makers, but there was insufficient communication among residents in different neighbourhood areas. Andrea Reimer, a City Councillor involved with the Grandview-Woodland engagement process, explained in a telephone interview that local activists could all agree on increasing density, but each group wanted density in different neighbourhood sub-areas (often, outside their own sub-area). Grandview-Woodland residents thus found themselves with little means to communicate, except through protest and veto. The City Council then stripped the most contentious pieces related to condominium developments out of the proposed neighbourhood plan. But the political damage had been done: deficits in inclusion and communication resulted in a politically toxic atmosphere. Ultimately, high levels of distrust of any city planning initiatives combined with mobilised neighbourhood resistance blocked the planning process and local decision makers found themselves unable to move forward. As Councillor Reimer put it, there was neighbourhood 'consensus on betrayal, but no consensus on outcome'. In these ways, the crisis brought to the surface democratic deficits in inclusion, communication and deliberation, and decision making that had mostly been latent in Vancouver's electoral democracy.

Could these deficits have been addressed through the broader and open venues of public participation and deliberation? These would be the first recommendations of many democratic theorists (Lafont 2015). The hope would be that practices of resistance in the Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood would create space for inclusion in large-scale public deliberation, which could then generate legitimate solutions that could then be picked up by the elected council, bypassing the senior bureaucrat gatekeepers most directly responsible for democratic deficits. However, perhaps ironically, in a case such as Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood planning, these kinds of staple recommendations would have exacerbated the existing democratic deficits. The reason is that powers to participate, voice opinions or resist are 'typically unequally distributed relative to legitimate claims' and so they are not, in themselves, inherently democratic (Warren 2017: 47). Patterns of resistance, participation and unstructured deliberation often reflect the well-known dependence of political engagement on existing social inequalities (Strolovitch 2006; Urbinati & Warren 2008; Warren 2001; Jacobs et al. 2009).

In Grandview-Woodland, these kinds of political inequalities were evident in the profiles of activists. Relative to the population, activists were disproportionately homeowners, and they were disproportionately whiter and older (Lyons 2014). According to surveys conducted by MASS LBP of local activists who participated in workshops to give feedback

on the design of a potential deliberative mini-public, over 61 per cent of online and face-to-face workshop participants were homeowners while only 21 per cent were renters (including co-op residents) (Lyons 2014: 10). However, according to Canadian census data, 65 per cent of residents in the neighbourhood at large are renters or co-op residents, and only 35 per cent are homeowners (City of Vancouver 2014: 31). While the neighbourhood prides itself on its ethnic diversity, MASS LBP's surveys of activists engaged at the early stage of the assembly planning process show that participants predominantly identified as 'Caucasian', 'Canadian', 'European', 'White Anglo' and 'English' (Lyons 2014: 11). Finally, according to census data, the neighbourhood is quite young, with over 40 per cent of residents below the age of 35. Yet only about 10 per cent of neighbourhood activists were in this age group (Lyons 2014: 9). The approximately 5 per cent of the neighbourhood that is elderly (i.e., over 75) was also underrepresented among neighbourhood activists. The planning issues affect a diverse range of citizens – ethnic and linguistic minorities, and other disempowered group members such as the poor, the young and the elderly, and renters – who were poorly represented among community activists.

Furthermore, although resisting proved to be an essential practice for communicating public dissatisfaction with the initial proposed neighbourhood plan – thus playing an important role in a political system marred by democratic deficits – it was not the best political practice for reasoning through issues to arrive at more informed, thoughtful policies. Neighbourhood plans require specialised knowledge and sustained attention. The issues involve zoning for density and land-use, traffic flows, predicted demographic trends and pressures, awareness of existing municipal, provincial and federal laws and regulations, as well as available sources of public and private financing. Effective deliberation on topics covered by a 30-year neighbourhood plan require learning and listening, access to experts with specialised knowledge and the inclusion of a diverse range of affected voices.

These deficits of inclusion, communication and deliberation undermined the city's capacities to decide and act. The City Council could not claim to be representative of the neighbourhood. Nor could the city claim it had been attentive to local voices since broken communication links at the upper-echelons of the bureaucracy meant that community feedback went unheard. This failure in turn generated political distrust and mobilised activists who communicated their frustration through resistance and veto. And although resisters contributed to the democratic function of communication by forcing city officials to heed neighbourhood concerns, participation in local resistance reflected patterns of inequality related to homeownership, ethnicity and age, while public discourses were insufficiently deliberative. Taken together, these democratic deficits left the city with no politically feasible way forward. In short, the planning process brought to the surface and crystallised the democratic deficits that had been latent in Vancouver's legacy institutions of representative democracy – a system not unlike those in other high-functioning democracies, with elected political officials and a highly professional bureaucracy.

Using deliberative mini-publics to address democratic deficits

Faced with an angry, distrustful public and unable to move beyond political gridlock, municipal civil servants sought out a democratic innovation that could promote the inclusion of affected residents, encourage deliberation and communicatively link constituents and

decision makers (Warren 2009b; 2014). Officials in the City of Vancouver's planning department recommended that a deliberative mini-public be convened and tasked with outlining a 30-year plan for the neighbourhood. The city hired an independent public engagement firm, MASS LBP, to design and implement the GWCA with the political aim of moving policy making past stalemate by addressing democratic deficits that the failed planning process had brought to the surface.

Deliberative mini-publics involve selecting a group of citizens to learn, deliberate and advise on a policy or issue. As the term has come to be used, *citizens' assemblies* (one kind of deliberative mini-public) are larger than most deliberative mini-publics and typically last longer. They are large enough that selection through near-random or stratified sampling is likely to produce a body that is demographically representative (Ryan & Smith 2014; Beauvais & Bächtiger 2016). Because of their demographic representativeness, they are better at including the perspectives and opinions of people who typically self-exclude from self-selected participatory processes, and who are unlikely to be represented in elected bodies (Ryan & Smith 2014; Setälä 2011; Beauvais & Bächtiger 2016; Grönlund et al. 2014). Compared to other ways of populating political bodies, near-random stratified sampling makes it more likely that the deliberating body is a microcosm of the relevant public – hence the term 'mini-public' (Fung 2003; Fishkin 2009). This kind of descriptive representation contributes to an ideal of political equality defined in terms of when 'all viewpoints relevant to a collective decision are heard and considered equally in a process of deliberation which leads to a decision' (Setälä 2011: 205; see also Beitz 1989). In addition, the citizens' assembly model of deliberative mini-publics typically lasts a long time – many months to as long as a year – to enable members to learn and deliberate about the problems they have been tasked to resolve (see Warren & Pearse 2008).

Deliberative mini-publics cannot replace the practices of voting and representation in democratic systems, which help achieve the ideal of universal equality (equal influence) through the practice of one-person-one-vote, and accountability through the powers to elect and remove governments (Setälä 2011; Beauvais 2018). Because participation in mini-publics is not open to just anyone, these kinds of governance-driven democratic innovations do not achieve broad inclusions through participation (Warren 2009b, 2014). Furthermore, because the participants are randomly selected to address a specific topic or issue, they do not conventionally represent geographic constituencies, and – perhaps obviously – because they are not elected, they cannot be held to account through elections (Gutmann & Thompson 1996; Setälä 2011). For these reasons, deliberative mini-publics are not (and have never intended to be) general solutions to democratic deficits, but they can target such deficits within specific policy problems and processes. We should think of mini-publics as supplementing existing electoral and representative institutions – and this is mostly how they have been used.

The citizens' assembly model proved especially useful in the Vancouver case, where the plurality at-large or 'block voting' electoral system (with its single, city-wide constituency) fails to geographically connect elected representatives to neighbourhoods. Whereas most deliberative mini-publics are organised around specific issues that do not represent geographic constituencies, such as political reform or new technologies (Gutmann & Thompson 1996; Setälä 2011), the GWCA was unusual because it actually helped constitute the otherwise unrepresented Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood community. As we

noted above, because there is no link between Vancouver's municipal elected politicians and specific neighbourhoods, the city's voters have difficulty holding representatives accountable for unsatisfactory neighbourhood-level policies. While the GWCA did not repair this underperforming principal-agent relationship, the near-randomly selected deliberative body helped to alleviate this democratic inclusion deficit by promoting a form of deliberative accountability – that is, accountability to those affected through the offering and receiving of perspectives and reasons for proposals (Setälä 2011; Gutmann & Thompson 1996; see also Warren 2008 on 'citizen representatives'). Our survey of the GWCA members indicates that they felt accountable to the neighbourhood in this sense. On average, they agreed that they were 'were accountable to members of the neighbourhood as a whole' (see the Appendix for survey details and question wording, and Appendix Table 1 for variable distributions). The common objection that mini-public participants are not accountable to the publics they represent because they cannot be voted out of power is belied by evidence that the participants *feel* that they are accountable to the publics they represent and behave accordingly (Warren 2008) – perhaps much like those who serve on legal juries.

This form of inclusion naturally supports deliberative quality and thus also addresses deliberative deficits. There is now ample evidence that deliberative mini-publics do, in fact, achieve high-quality deliberation (Bächtiger et al. 2014; Warren & Gastil 2015; Cutler et al. 2008; Warren & Pearse 2008; Beauvais & Bächtiger 2016; Knobloch & Gastil 2015; Smith 2009; Beauvais 2018). While we will not reiterate this evidence, we will underscore those design features incorporated into the GWCA that likely supported high-quality learning and deliberation. For instance, near-random selection of participants helps promote democratic deliberation by ensuring a diverse range of voices are heard and considered, which not only promotes inclusion, but also tends to increase cognitive diversity, which in turn is likely to produce higher quality deliberation (Landemore 2013).

Near-random selection also underwrites deliberative quality by sheltering deliberations within the body from the strategic considerations of vested and well-organised interests, such as a non-representative, organised interest group (e.g., homeowner activists or property developers) seeking to steer community decision making or politicians seeking re-election (Warren 2008). The results from our survey of GWCA members support this expectation. On average, the respondents disagreed with the statement 'This process was undermined by organized interests' (see Appendix Table 1).

Another key design feature used by the GWCA organisers and now considered part of the citizens' assembly model of deliberative mini-publics is an extensive learning and listening phase, where assembly members hear from experts and interveners representing different perspectives, and from representatives of particularly affected groups. These features not only increase the inclusiveness of the process, but also underwrite its deliberativeness. The literature suggests that the learning and listening phase of citizens' assembly processes helps promote more reasoned and informed discourse than often occurs in the unstructured mass public just because members focus their time and attention on the issues at hand (Esterling et al. 2011; Cutler et al. 2008; Fournier et al. 2011).

Listening and learning have both technical and political functions. With respect to technical functions, the GWCA members not only heard from planners and experts at each meeting, but also took part in neighbourhood tours and a tour of Vancouver's port, during which they learned about zoning, traffic, demographic projections, density

requirements and budgets. With respect to political learning, the GWCA also heard from organised interests, including representatives from community agencies such as Kiwassa Neighbourhood House, immigrant integration services such as Mosaic Vancouver, youth groups, seniors' groups, representatives from the arts community, and homeowner activist groups such as Our Community Our Plan! and the Grandview-Woodland Area Council (see Grandview-Woodland Citizens' Assembly 2015). Although mini-publics exclude organised interests from the body itself, they are typically connected through presentations from advocates made during the learning process, not unlike the way a jury learns from lawyers and witnesses before deliberating to reach a verdict. Our survey results support these expectations: on average, GWCA members disagreed with the statement that the process 'was undermined by organised interests' (see Appendix Table 1).

Still another design characteristic that potentially affects the deliberative quality of deliberative mini-publics is the question of how many – and which – issues participants address within a single process. With respect to the optimal number of issues, the consensus in the literature is that participants should deal with a single or a small set of closely related issues to avoid the 'risk of log-rolling if a minipublic deals with more than one issue' (Bächtiger et al. 2014: 238), as well as the risk that more political complexity reduces the likelihood that the body can produce actionable recommendations or decisions. Contrary to this recommendation, Vancouver's GWCA was tasked with developing a 30-year plan for the neighbourhood – a task that required reviewing existing policy proposals and drafting new proposals on a diverse range of issues, from housing (zoning, affordability and land use) to transportation, heritage, arts and culture, the local economy, health and community well-being, and even the environment and climate change. A range of issues this extensive is rarely addressed by a single engagement forum (Lindquist 2005). Contrary to the expectations of the literature, the GWCA effectively handled this wide range of topics, producing a detailed and well-informed 30-year plan for the neighbourhood.

The GWCA was also unusual in that it involved highly politicised, 'hot' deliberation – that is, deliberation that concerns participants' deeply held beliefs or welfare, or is convened after controversy. Most students of deliberation mini-publics expect that 'cold' deliberation will be easier (cf. Fung 2003). The argument is that 'individuals with low stakes in a discussion will be open-minded, begin without fixed positions, and [will be] dispassionate' (Fung 2003: 345). To date, it appears that most citizens' assemblies have been convened around issues that tend to be 'colder' in that the issues, while very important, have technical features about which publics often have few opinions. For example, the British Columbia Citizens' Assembly on Electoral Reform focused on choosing an electoral system – an issue about which only the most attentive citizens will have well-developed opinions or strong beliefs (Warren & Pearse 2008). In contrast, while some of the issues the GWCA considered were highly technical and potentially dispassionate, such as traffic bylaws, the fact that the Assembly was convened under controversy ensured deliberations were hot. The GWCA offers evidence for Fung's (2003) intuition that hot deliberations can also be high quality (see also Hendriks et al. 2007). Our survey of Assembly members revealed that participation rates were high, the participants invested in learning and deliberation, and most of them felt that they had equal opportunities to express their views and took one another's claims seriously in deliberations (see Appendix Table 1).

Deliberative mini-publics not only absorb knowledge from the broader public, they can also focus deliberation within the broader publics they represent when there are working channels of communication. There is now some evidence that when citizens know about deliberative mini-publics they take them as cues to learn more about an issue, and sometimes use them as trusted information proxies for their own decision-making processes – for example, voting in a referendum (Warren & Gastil 2015; Setälä 2011). The GWCA process was linked to the broader neighbourhood through three open public roundtable meetings. At these meetings GWCA members shared plans and rationales with members of the public and listened to feedback. MASS LBP and city officials reported that the roundtable meetings were well attended for these kinds of events, with between 80 and 129 people attending each one. MASS LBP's survey data collected from members of the public who participated in the roundtable meetings reveals positive feedback on the meetings' communicative quality, which is remarkable given the 'hot' nature of the planning process, the atmosphere of distrust within which the GWCA was convened and the likelihood that those who attended the workshops were highly motivated activists. On average, roundtable participants tended to agree with the statement that they were 'able to have good conversations about things that matter' across all three meetings (see Appendix Table 2). Councillor Reimer also expressed the belief that the GWCA had broader reach in the community. In noting that assembly members invested in learning from experts and advocates and then deliberated about the issues, Reimer commented that 'one of the incredible things about a citizens' assembly is that suddenly you have a group of people who are urban planning literate, feel comfortable talking about the issues, and are mobilizing that ownership with other members of their community'. In sum, the GWCA appears to have combined communication among mobilised members of the neighbourhood with high-quality learning and deliberation within the mini-public.

Can deliberative mini-publics contribute to the third functional requirement of democratic political systems – transforming inclusions and deliberation into collective decisions on behalf of the people? The degree to which deliberative mini-publics increase capacities for collective decision making is primarily determined by their relationship to the key sites of decision making. In electoral democracies, these capacities are held primarily by elected legislatures and executives, by the agencies and ministries they direct and, in some places, ballot measures such as referendums. We know of no cases in which deliberative mini-publics have *replaced* elected representatives or citizen decisions through ballot measures. It is generally thought that selection for descriptive representation through near-random or stratified random sampling does not grant deliberative bodies sufficient authorisation to make collective decisions because random selection cannot achieve accountability and equality the way voting for political representatives does (Setälä 2011; Warren 2008). Of course, as Setälä (2011: 209) notes, the problems of mini-publics making binding decisions are so far 'mostly hypothetical'.

That said, we can assess the relationship between deliberative mini-publics and collective decision making by looking at two kinds of deliberative influence. First, deliberative mini-publics can impact how decision makers think about and formulate policy. Second, there are potential impacts on publics that make it easier for decision makers to make decisions that people view as legitimate, and thus can move policies beyond stalemate or gridlock. If

deliberative mini-publics can build legitimacy for a proposal or policy, decision makers will have increased capacities to adopt it.

Two institutional design choices are likely to be important for determining whether the results of deliberative mini-publics can effectively increase collective decision capacities through deliberative influence. First, they should be linked with decision makers through ‘designed coupling’ (Hendriks 2016; Mansbridge et al. 2012). When sites of public reasoning and democratic decision makers become uncoupled, good reasons emanating from one part of the deliberative system ‘fail to penetrate into others’ (Mansbridge et al. 2012: 23). This kind of uncoupling occurred with Grandview-Woodland’s initial (pre-mini-public) planning process, when public input density issues were blocked by a senior civil servant and failed to influence the first, contentious draft of planning proposals – proposals that were, in effect, vetoed by local activists. Largely because of this political failure, the GWCA was effectively coupled with the City Council and the bureaucracy: city senior planners were available throughout the process to answer Assembly members’ questions, and to receive feedback. And when the GWCA finished drafting their proposed policy directions, they were formally invited to present their proposals to the City Council so that its members could vote on whether to adopt the GWCA’s proposals.

It is possible, however, for a mini-public to be *so* tightly coupled to sites of collective decision making that decision makers or other powerful interests have too much influence over it, co-opt the process or merely appear to do so, undermining its legitimacy. There is evidence that many deliberative mini-publics fall prey to this problem, with governments or other organising bodies attempting to steer them toward specific outcomes, presumably to generate legitimacy for policies decided elsewhere (Johnson 2015). The City of Vancouver avoided this problem by hiring an independent firm, MASS LBP, to design and administer the GWCA, ensuring the process remained at arm’s length from both elected decision makers and city planners, the while the members completed the learning and listening, deliberating and recommendation phases. The GWCA was designed to feed into the city’s key decision-making body, the City Council, but worked relatively autonomously from city influence.

The second design feature likely to be important for whether deliberative mini-publics effectively infuse elected politicians and bureaucrats’ policy making with deliberatively generated proposals has to do with timing: the question of *when* mini-publics are sequenced into policy-making processes. Most deliberative mini-publics are ‘front-loaded’ and aim to ‘generate public discussion and refine [public] opinion’ (Fung 2003: 346). In this way, deliberative mini-publics often resemble government-initiated referendums, which are used ‘by governmental authorities on ad hoc basis to help resolve difficult issues and to legitimise policy-making’ (Setälä 2011: 208). Because front-loaded mini-publics are typically convened by policy makers or elected officials, there is concern that political elites can set the agenda in a way that promotes a particular goal (Bächtiger et al. 2014; Parkinson 2004). Less often, mini-publics involve ‘back-loaded’ deliberation, where participants review the quality of policy makers’ ongoing action and implementation (Fung 2003: 346). Back-loaded deliberative forums also suffer from the drawback that participants do not get to set the agenda for deliberation. The benefit of back-loaded deliberative forums is that citizen monitoring creates transparency which can enhance legitimacy and public faith in ongoing policies.

Because the GWCA was a response to a failed planning process, it was spliced into an ongoing procedure, meaning that it most closely resembled a back-loaded process.³ It was convened after the first set of neighbourhood policy directions had been drafted, and so Assembly members played an important role in reviewing the quality or acceptability of city planners' policy directions. Although the timing was determined more by the necessity to repair the political damage from a failed process, it turned out to be for the best owing to the complexity of drafting a 30-year plan on topics as diverse as housing (zoning, affordability and land use), transportation, heritage, arts and culture, the local economy, health, and climate change. Indeed, the first set of neighbourhood planning directions took professional city planners two years to draft. It would have been difficult for citizens to draft the plan from scratch in a relatively short (eight-month) period. According to Councillor Reimer, the GWCA was able to handle the complexity of their task in part because they were able to build upon two years of work by the city's professional planners.

Nonetheless, the GWCA was not limited to judging existing policies and was given the liberty to propose new policy directions. It thus also played an important role in front-end policy making. Counterintuitively, the fact that the Assembly was convened after a public outcry also may have bolstered the GWCA's democratic potential by preventing the first set of policy proposals from being the only source of information-framing discussions. The GWCA also had to address the dominant competing frame – the homeowner activists' anti-density narrative.

Like other citizens' assemblies, including the British Columbia and Ontario citizens' assemblies on electoral reform, GWCA participants sought to reach their recommendations through consensus, but dissenters were given space to express themselves in a minority report. And much like other deliberative mini-publics charged with delivering advice, members of the GWCA were aware that consensus would be an important issue to its impact. They were, in effect, seeking influence through legitimacy. The City Council, in turn, was seeking recommendations that would satisfy most people in the neighbourhood, demobilise opposition to city planning, enable the policy process to move forward and (importantly) improve Councillors' prospects in the upcoming city elections.

The combination of these factors meant that the GWCA was able to impact collective decision making despite its purely advisory status. Assembly members presented their recommendations, which included judgements on proposed policies from the first set of neighbourhood planning directions, as well as new proposals achieved through deliberation and public engagement, to the City Council in 2016. The GWCA's proposals were subsequently ratified by the Council and then referred to the city's planning department to fill in the details. Most (92 per cent) of the GWCA's 236 in-scope recommendations were incorporated into the new community plan; however, because of the complexity of the plan, the planning department found that they needed to depart from the recommendations in several of the details (City of Vancouver 2016). To ensure the revised plan met with the approval of Assembly members and the broader community, the Council flagged the departures and then reconvened the GWCA for explanation, review and approval.

After completion of the process, the GWCA Chair, Rachel Magnusson, told the researchers that she had been worried that the Assembly members would be upset at the city's proposed changes, particularly those related to increasing density. However, when the Assembly was reconvened, city staff explained to its members exactly how their

recommendations had been incorporated in the new community plan and explained when and why the Council felt it needed to depart from any recommendations. According to feedback forms submitted to the Council after the GWCA reviewed the city's new planning directions, 91 per cent of Assembly members were satisfied with the degree to which their recommendations were incorporated into the plan, and 82 per cent agreed that the proposed plan struck 'an appropriate balance between the specific interests and issues of the community and broader city-wide goals and aspirations' (City of Vancouver 2016: 10–11). GWCA Chair Magnusson suggested that this result 'spoke to the trust that was built up through the process' as Assembly members were persuaded that 'the city had done their homework' before departing from the recommendations. Ultimately, almost all of the GWCA's recommendations were incorporated into the city's plan, and the Assembly members expressed a high degree of support for the result.

In addition to communicating with GWCA members, the City of Vancouver also made extensive efforts to communicate the results of the process – and how and why the city arrived at the new set of planning directions – to the wider community. A postcard was mailed to every household (approximately 18,000 households) in the neighbourhood alerting Grandview-Woodland residents of the plan's release and outlining opportunities for feedback and engagement, and large posters were installed in the community (City of Vancouver 2016: 12). Furthermore, the city's website was updated with summary information as well as the full plan, list-serve notifications were sent out to 1,470 unique email addresses and social media notifications were sent out to the 380 Facebook users who 'liked' the planning process and 700 Twitter users following the Grandview-Woodland planning process. According to the comment forms collected by the city after publishing the new community plan based on the GWCA's recommendations, a majority (56 per cent) of community members agreed that the plan struck a balance between local issues and city-wide goals⁴ (City of Vancouver 2016: 12). GWCA Chair Magnusson told the researchers that although community support for the revised plan was not as high as the Assembly's support it 'was pretty significant', especially given the polarised, distrustful political context. Councillor Reimer acknowledged that establishing the GWCA was a 'reactive decision'. However, Reimer also felt that 'given the circumstances, it was the only possible chance of moving forward'. As Magnusson told the researchers, 'the citizens' assembly was crucial for shifting the whole tone and rebuilding that bridge [between the community and the city] so the conversation about neighbourhood planning could get back on track'. In this case, the GWCA proved to be effective in moving decision making past stalemate.

Conclusion: Mini-publics within representative democracy

Although we have analysed just one case, the example of the GWCA addresses a broadly important theoretical and practical question: How can and should deliberative mini-publics relate to the legacy institutions of electoral democracy? To frame this question, we used a problem-based approach to democratic theory to identify three kinds of democratic deficits in the City of Vancouver's neighbourhood planning process – deficits of inclusion, communication and deliberation, and collective decision capacities. Each of these deficits was reflected in the breakdown of the city's planning processes, and each seems to have motivated the creation of the GWCA. Our study of the process suggests that the GWCA did

a remarkably good job of supplementing Vancouver's legacy institutions; it did so in such a way that the democratic legitimacy of the planning process was dramatically increased. Most generally, we help to show how deliberative mini-publics might be integrated into democratic systems to supplement existing legacy institutions and how they can respond to growing democratic deficits plaguing the consolidated democracies in our increasingly interconnected, globalised world (Dryzek & Dunleavy 2009; Fung & Warren 2011; Grönlund et al. 2014; Newton & Geissel 2012). Deliberative mini-publics are not, of course, the solution to every deficit in legacy institutions, but our case adds to the evidence that deliberative mini-publics can deepen democracy for some kinds of problems, under some conditions. We need to continue to design democratic supplements that address specific kinds of deficits.

The GWCA case offers some more specific lessons as well. First, it suggests that mini-publics can be used for hot deliberations and effectively address a wide range of issues without logrolling. Of course, certain features likely helped participants deliberate on such a wide range of issues and should be considered by future practitioners organising deliberative mini-publics. Second, the GWCA's unusual timing – spliced into the middle of a decision-making process – was important. Sequencing the Assembly into the middle of a policy-making process meant that its members had access to an initial set of policy directions drafted by the city. The case supports the intuition of early advocates of deliberative mini-publics that they are particularly effective when convened after stakeholders and experts draft recommendations, but before decision makers reach a final decision (Renn et al. 1993). Third, and following on from this point, the GWCA's eight-month timeframe, albeit long relative to other deliberative mini-publics, is a relatively short timeframe within which to draft 30-year neighbourhood planning directions on such a wide variety of topics. The GWCA's ability to handle a complex, multi-issue task was almost certainly dependent upon the work that city planners had already accomplished over the previous two years. This context could have risked the GWCA's autonomy (and thus its credibility with the neighbourhood) owing to the possibility the planner's work could frame and thus steer the Assembly's thinking. The politicised nature of the context, however, meant that GWCA members had competing frameworks with which to work and were sensitised to their political roles in crafting a plan acceptable to the neighbourhood. These factors almost certainly reduced the chances of bureaucratic co-optation or capture, and at the same time motivated the high levels of commitment to the process necessary for such a complex task (Fung 2003).

Finally, our case suggests that when a deliberative mini-public moves policy making beyond gridlock owing to its inclusive and deliberative qualities, it increases a political system's capacities for collective action. For their part, elected officials should be able to borrow democratic legitimacy from citizens' assembly proposals, making it both easier for them to act and more likely that they will act. The GWCA helped policy makers, activists and affected residents move a stalemated planning process forward, and it did do so in ways that improved democratic performance. Depending on when and how they are sequenced into democratic processes, deliberative institutions can supplement existing institutions and practices to deepen democratic system's capacities for empowered inclusion, deliberative agenda formation, and collective decision making.

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Appendix

Results from the survey of the Grandview-Woodland Citizens' Assembly members

Results of a survey we administered to GWCA members after the final meeting of the citizens' assembly, in May 2015, suggest Assembly members perceived they were deliberatively accountable to the neighbourhood. In addition, they reported a high degree

Appendix Table 1. Survey of GWCA Assembly members: Variable distributions

Concept	Variables	Frequency	%	Cum.
Deliberative accountability	<i>Members of the Citizens' Assembly were accountable to members of the neighbourhood as a whole.</i>			
	Strongly disagree	0	–	–
	Disagree	4	11.76	11.76
	Neither agree nor disagree	8	23.53	35.29
	Agree	19	55.88	91.18
	Strongly agree	3	8.82	100
	Total	34	100.00	
Learning and opinion change	<i>My understanding of neighbourhood policies has increased.</i>			
	Strongly disagree	2	5.88	5.88
	Disagree	0	–	–
	Neither agree nor disagree	0	–	–

(Continued)

Appendix Table 1. Continued

Concept	Variables	Frequency	%	Cum.
	Agree	13	38.24	44.12
	Strongly agree	19	55.88	100
	Total	34	100	
	<i>My views have changed since taking part in this process.</i>			
	Strongly disagree	1	2.94	2.94
	Disagree	3	8.82	11.76
	Neither agree nor disagree	8	23.53	35.29
	Agree	19	55.88	91.18
	Strongly agree	3	8.82	100.00
	Total	34	100.00	
Deliberative quality	<i>During group discussions, how often did you participate (speak)?</i>			
	Never	0	–	–
	Sometimes	9	26.47	26.47
	Often	20	58.82	85.29
	Always	5	14.71	100
	I practically led the discussion	0	–	–
	Total	34	100.00	
	<i>Everyone had an equal opportunity to express their point of view.</i>			
	Strongly disagree	0	–	–
	Disagree	3	8.82	8.82
	Neither agree nor disagree	4	11.76	20.59
	Agree	20	58.82	79.41
	Strongly agree	7	20.59	100
	Total	34	100.00	
	<i>Other participants took my concerns seriously.</i>			
	Strongly disagree	1	2.94	2.94
	Disagree	5	14.71	17.65
	Neither agree nor disagree	4	11.76	29.41
	Agree	19	55.88	85.29
	Strongly agree	5	14.71	100
	Total	34	100.00	
Organised interests	<i>This process was undermined by organised interests.</i>			
	Strongly disagree	5	14.71	14.71
	Disagree	18	52.94	67.65
	Neither agree nor disagree	9	26.47	94.12
	Agree	1	2.94	97.06
	Strongly agree	1	2.94	100
	Total	34	100	

Appendix Table 2. Survey of roundtable participants: Variable distributions

Roundtable	Variable	Frequency	%	Cum.
Roundtable 1 (November 2014)	<i>Were you able to have good quality conversations about issues that matter?</i>			
	No, not at all	3	2.33	2.33
	Somewhat	19	14.73	17.05
	Yes	85	65.89	82.95
	Very much so	22	17.05	100
	Total	129	100	
Roundtable 2 (March 2015)	<i>Were you able to have good quality conversations about issues that matter?</i>			
	No, not at all	1	1.14	1.14
	Somewhat	21	23.86	25
	Yes	48	54.55	79.55
	Very much so	18	20.45	100
	Total	88	100	
Roundtable 3 (May 2015)	<i>Were you able to have good quality conversations about issues that matter?</i>			
	No, not at all	1	1.25	1.25
	Somewhat	24	30	31.25
	Yes	49	61.25	92.5
	Very much so	6	7.5	100
	Total	80	100	

of learning and degree of opinion change as well as high deliberative quality. We solicited all 48 Assembly members to participate in our study, and 34 completed our questionnaires. The high response rate (71 per cent) gives us confidence that the surveys are reflective of most Assembly members' experiences with the process.

MASS LBP's surveys of members of the public who attended roundtable meetings

MASS LBP conducted their own surveys of members of the public who participated at roundtable meetings. MASS LBP gave a questionnaire to each participant at the roundtables, and although we do not have exact data on response rates, MASS LBP reports that most participants completed their questionnaires.

Notes

1. In an interview with the *Toronto Standard*, Peter McLeod, the founder of MASS LBP, explained the name of the organisation by saying:

There is a great quote attributed to the American revolutionary, Thomas Paine, who said 'there is a mass of sense lying in a dormant state which good government should quietly harness' and I think it's a strong evocation of the role of government to tap into that latent intelligence called common sense. So our name is a tip of the hat to him and I suppose also to the sociologists who have tried to make sense of what it means to live in a mass society. LBP simply stands for Led By People. It's a bit of whimsy. (Wilkinson-Latham 2011)

2. The conversations with Councillor Reimer and Chair Magnusson are to give context and insight from elites deeply involved with the process, and their opinions are not meant to be generalisable to all decision makers in Vancouver. The interviews were transcribed during the telephone conversations. Contact the authors for details.
3. The GWCA is the not first or only case where a mini-public has been spliced into the middle of a planning process. While the literature suggests most deliberative mini-publics are frontloaded (Fung 2003; Setälä 2011), mini-publics have been effectively situated midway through planning processes (Renn et al. 1993).
4. Unfortunately, the City of Vancouver did not ask the GWCA members and members of the public the same feedback questions, so it is difficult to directly compare levels of support for the final planning proposals based on the GWCA's recommendations. Note also that this is feedback from community members who participated in the city's engagement processes and is not a representative sample. While we do not have survey data from a representative sample of the neighbourhood, considering the high degree of opposition that materialised against the first set of policy plans at engagement processes, the fact that a majority of community activists endorsed the new plans can be taken as evidence that the citizens' assembly model helped boost community support (at least among actively engaged community members) for the new plan. We can also infer the GWCA generated legitimacy for its recommendations from the fact that organised opposition to the planning process has not reappeared.

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