Message from the Minister Responsible for Voluntary Planning Board

I am committed, as are my colleagues, to strengthening public engagement across the province. We recognize that open and effective consultation is fundamental to how government operates at every level. Nova Scotia faces major challenges as it works to create good jobs, grow the economy, improve health care and overcome a deep structural deficit. To meet these challenges we need to enhance public engagement and stakeholder participation in many areas of planning and policy development.

In 2010 Voluntary Planning Board resources were moved into a central agency thereby building new capacity to strengthen consultation practices across government and to transfer knowledge and skills to front-line staff in every department. The new unit will provide support and training on strategies, standards and best practices, and will help co-ordinate events to ensure optimal public participation.

For Nova Scotians, this means more opportunities to be heard in a meaningful way and to help shape public policy in this province.

Honourable Frank Corbett
Chair of Treasury Board
About Voluntary Planning (1963-2010)

Voluntary Planning had a rich history of involving Nova Scotians in public discussions about provincial government policy and programs. The organization’s mandate expanded over time from its original exclusive focus on economic planning to broader engagement on the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Nova Scotians. Voluntary Planning focused on the long-term and emphasized the importance of diversity in its work.

The Voluntary Planning leadership entity was its Board of Directors. Its operations were carried out primarily through volunteer-led citizen engagement processes. For most of its history, standing committees, called sector committees, were the engine of vitality for the organization producing several hundreds of policy, position and research papers, contributing significantly to a number of pieces of legislation and Royal Commissions and creating spin-off organizations.

Voluntary Planning also undertook major citizen engagement projects assigned by the provincial government and led by a task force committee of volunteers who would consult, research, and ultimately provide recommendations to the government on the best public policies for Nova Scotia on a given topic.

Recent Accomplishments

Major Projects

In recent years, the organization undertook several major projects assigned by the provincial government including citizen engagement processes on a natural resources strategy and a heritage strategy.

Natural Resources Strategy

In May, 2007 the Department of Natural Resources announced plans for a new natural resources strategy that will govern future directions for Nova Scotia’s forests, minerals, parks and biodiversity. Voluntary Planning was asked by the department to find out what Nova Scotians value about our natural resources, with a view to strengthening the final strategy. Voluntary Planning recruited a volunteer Natural Resources Citizen Engagement Committee to lead the citizen engagement process.

The 7-member Citizen Engagement Committee presented the key thoughts, concerns and values expressed by Nova Scotians in a final report, Our Common Ground, March 2009. The information gathered through community meetings, written submissions and workshops provided the foundation for later stages in strategy development.
Heritage Strategy

An 11-member volunteer Heritage Strategy Task Force, recruited by Voluntary Planning in 2005, engaged representatives of stakeholder organizations, experts and citizens to find out what Nova Scotians value most about heritage including the elements they wanted to see most celebrated and protected. The Task Force made special efforts to hear the views of typically under-represented aspects of Nova Scotia’s society in consultation processes including Mi’kmaq, African Nova Scotian, Acadian and newer immigrant communities.

The findings and recommendations of the task force, released in a report titled Our Heritage Future A Shared Responsibly, December 2006, informed development of government’s first provincial heritage strategy A Treasured Past A Precious Future, February 2008. The task force’s influence is noted throughout the strategy.

Chinese Government

April 2009, Voluntary Planning hosted an information session at Saint Mary’s University for a delegation of town planning experts under the leadership of the National Development and Reform Commission of China, traveling to Canada to learn first hand how public input is developed and utilized in government planning.

The Voluntary Planning organization was of particular interest to the Chinese delegation because of its positioning within the provincial government, its inclusiveness and its long standing history of citizen engagement on policy issues.

Minister of Finance “Back to Balance” Dialogue Sessions

From January to March, 2010 the Honourable Graham Steele, Minister of Finance, held 19 interactive public dialogue sessions to inform Nova Scotians about the province’s fiscal situation and encourage them to identify their priorities for getting “back to balance”.

Voluntary Planning staff provided logistical support to the Department of Finance in arranging meeting facilities, technicians and equipment, in transcribing notes from the public discussions, and by providing staff support at each of the sessions. In partnership with the Department of Finance and Communications Nova Scotia, Voluntary Planning staff administered a Back to Balance Twitter account, b2balance.
Guiding Principles and Practices

In 2010 Voluntary Planning Board resources were moved into a central agency. Voluntary Planning’s guiding principles and its system of consulting, researching, and engaging talented people on the complex issues of the day have formed the foundation of a new Public Engagement Support Unit’s way of working with provincial departments and agencies, and will inform the development of internal to government public engagement standards.

Voluntary Planning’s Guiding Principles for Citizen Engagement

- Recognition of the Interests of Stakeholders, Citizens and Communities
  - Inclusive
  - Respectful
  - Objective
  - Responsive

The following descriptors of Voluntary Planning’s practices will continue to be applicable to the work of the Public Engagement Support Unit:

Collaborative
- Fostering of collaborative partnerships inside and outside government to ensure that engagement processes tap into the unique wisdom of many communities and communities of interest.

Addresses Long-Term, Complex Issues
- Addressing long-term policy issues that impact the entire province, cutting across many departments and impacting a range of stakeholders.

Best Practice
- Keeping current on national and international best practices of public engagement.

Capacity Building
- Taking full advantage of the opportunity to increase public knowledge and awareness on the issue at hand and of the value of contributing to such deliberations.

Using a Variety of Tools and Techniques
- Making use of a variety of models for providing policy advice to government based on the input of citizens, stakeholders and communities.

Innovative
- Guided by the philosophy of continuous improvement, seeking opportunities to innovate the practice of citizen engagement in Nova Scotia – whether in face-to-face meetings or through social media.
Transition to Public Engagement Support Unit

Public engagement is integral to virtually all government policy, planning and program management activities and to legislative and regulatory change. Governments across Canada and internationally are increasingly providing centralized support for their departments and agencies in strengthening engagement practices.

In the 2010-11 fiscal year former Voluntary Planning staff formed the new Public Engagement Support Unit under Treasury Board and work began in supporting the public engagement needs of the Nova Scotia government related to its current priorities.

The goal in establishing the new unit is to support excellence and innovation in public engagement across government by:

- Networking and forming partnerships
- Coordination and convening
- Access to resources
- Access to learning opportunities
- Support to the decision making process
- Support and advice to departments and agencies
- Inclusion
- Innovation including digital approaches (social media, web-based applications)
- Standards
- Evaluation