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Policy analysis in local government

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Introduction

Municipal governments play a crucial role in the Canadian political system, serving as a democratic mechanism to address public problems at the community level. Municipalities are governed by a stable executive body—the council—which is empowered by electoral mandate to make and enforce binding decisions for the population and territory within its jurisdiction, and these decisions are backed up by the police powers of the state. Elected officials debate and sanction policy proposals in a legislative chamber, the proceedings of which are transparent and accessible. A public treasury generated largely through local taxes and fees is used to fund chosen priorities, and a permanent, politically neutral bureaucracy implements the decisions of the political executive. Local politicians, motivated by a need to attract and sustain electoral support, are sensitive to public opinion and responsive to the demands of individuals and pressure groups, who use various channels to articulate their interests and employ a range of tactics to communicate their policy preferences. In sum, municipal governance has most of the structural features found at higher levels of government that enable the effective translation of public needs and wants into legitimate courses of action.

Municipalities differ from other levels of government in several important respects, however. First, unlike the federal and provincial governments, whose legal powers are enumerated in Canada's constitution, municipal governments have no sovereign authority: their powers, functional responsibilities and access to sources of operating revenue are specifically delegated by provincial statute (Sancton, 2000). Second, provincial legislation often imposes legal and financial obligations on local governments, which are expected to serve as administrative agents in implementing provincial policy directives (Fowler & Siegel, 2002, pp. 8–9). Third, municipal policy decisions are subject not only to legal challenge by aggrieved parties who perceive them to be *ultra vires*, but also to political challenge by those who seek to shift the locus of decision-making by appealing to provincial authorities to intervene (Friskin, 1997). Fourth, due to their closer proximity to residents and stakeholders, municipal policymakers are less insulated from the narrow interests of small groups of outspoken citizens who represent extreme views on issues (Trautman, 2016). Finally, due in part to provincial legislation

that requires open meetings, the policy process of municipal governments is more open to public participation and scrutiny (Siegel, 1994).

Interest in municipal policymaking has increased in recent years, as evidenced through a major collaborative research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (2004–2010), which analyzed policies and policymaking in various municipal policy fields, including emergency management (Henstra, 2013), image-building (Harvey & Young, 2012) and immigrant settlement (Tolley & Young, 2011). However, despite the unique nature and dynamics of the local policy process, much of the Canadian policy studies literature is focused on the federal and provincial governments, with comparatively less research attention devoted to local government policy development.

This chapter seeks to contribute to scholarship in this area by examining policymaking in municipalities. Its specific emphasis is local policy analysis, defined as the processes and techniques by which principled courses of action are developed in response to public issues and communicated to local decision-makers. The chapter first assesses the nature of municipal public policy, by specifying the functional responsibilities of local governments and distinguishing the different types of policy issues with which local public managers grapple. It then describes the dynamics of local policymaking, including the process by which ideas and demands are translated into courses of action, and the institutions and actors that structure and influence policy choices. The third section focuses on policy analytical capacity, examining its meaning and importance in the local political system. The remaining two sections analyze the local policy advice system, drawing on evidence from a pilot research study to illuminate the demand for policy-relevant information and advice by municipal decision-makers, and its supply as provided by municipal policy professionals

The nature of public policy in local government

The term ‘local government’ includes various types of municipalities, such as cities, towns, townships and villages, but also a large number of agencies, boards and commissions, such as conservation authorities, school boards and public utilities commissions that are created under provincial or municipal authority to serve specific governing functions in communities or regions (Richmond & Siegel, 1994). The analysis in this chapter focuses on municipal governments, but includes both single-tier municipalities—those with sole responsibility for funding and providing services to residents—and two-tier structures, in which service responsibilities are divided between several lower-tier municipalities and a single, upper-tier authority (a regional or county government) that also delivers services to residents.

Municipal governments vary significantly in size and capacity, ranging from small, rural villages like Krydor, Saskatchewan, with a census population of 25 people, to the dense urban metropolis of Toronto, which houses a population of more than 2.6 million, or nearly 8 per cent of Canadians. Among the roughly

3,800 census subdivisions tracked by Statistics Canada, the median population size is about 970, and nearly 90 per cent have a population of less than 10,000 people (Statistics Canada, 2016). This variation makes it difficult to generalize about municipal policy work, so the analysis presented here necessarily focuses on larger communities.

Historically, municipal functions were limited in scope, related largely to regulating disorderly behaviour and nuisance, preserving order and supporting the production and maintenance of the built environment. Today, municipal governments continue to perform many of the functions necessary to facilitate economic development and growth, such as installing buried infrastructure, maintaining roads and regulating construction standards by enforcing codes and guidelines. However, they also provide a diverse array of other services to residents and organizations, including:

- *protective services*, such as policing, fire fighting and emergency planning, which are intended to protect people and property from human and environmental threats;
- *transportation services*, including road construction and maintenance, public transit and snow-clearing, which facilitate movement of people and goods in the community;
- *environmental services*, such as waste collection, sanitary and storm water treatment and recycling, which protect health and safety and contribute to environmental sustainability;
- *social services* to assist members of the community with personal and family needs, such as public health, childcare, social housing and immigrant settlement services; and
- *recreation and cultural services*, such as parks and libraries, which contribute to a vibrant community and enhance quality of life for residents.

Most decisions taken by municipal councils are routine administrative matters, such as zoning by-law amendments, board appointments, tender contract awards, and so on, and these decisions typically involve endorsing or rejecting recommendations from council committees. However, council decisions occasionally establish plans, strategies and frameworks intended to guide future actions concerning particular issue areas. These fit well with the scholarly understanding of public policy as “a course of action or inaction chosen by public authorities to address a problem or interrelated set of problems” (Pal, 2014, p. 2). For example, anticipating an increase in the number of residents over 55 years of age, in 2015 the City of Waterloo, Ontario adopted an Older Adult Recreation Strategy. The goals of the Strategy are to provide appropriate services for older adults, increase volunteer capacity to serve older adults, ensure recreation programmes are affordable, provide dedicated, accessible older adult facility space, and expand day programmes to ensure older adults stay connected to the community (Waterloo, 2015). Most municipalities have at least some official policies, relating predominantly to land

use (for example, Vancouver's View Protection Policy), the built environment (for example, Edmonton's Building Accessibility Policy), and corporate practices (for example, Halifax's Employment Equity Policy).

Local governments deal with many different types of policies. The nature of these domains and the political dynamics that surround them can vary considerably (Saiz, 1999; Sharp, 1997; Smith, 2002). *Allocative policies* are courses of action pertaining to the type and level of services provided to residents—fire protection, garbage collection, snow clearing, and so on—which are typically funded out of the municipal budget (DeHoog, 1997; Pelissero, 2003, pp. 21–22). Decisions in the allocative arena are typically unremarkable and routine and attract little public attention or participation, but occasionally become the subject of heated controversy. As an example, an August 2016 decision to close three local library branches in the Eastern Ontario county of Stormont, Dundas and Glengarry triggered considerable opposition from residents and prompted the resignation of one of the members of the Library Board (CTV Ottawa, 2016).

Development-related issues tend to dominate the municipal policy agenda, and they often generate conflict between those who favour development and those who oppose it. In Pitt Meadows, British Columbia, for instance, a 2015 proposal to develop 200 acres of agricultural land into a light industrial business park drew significant opposition from nearby residents, who feared a loss of aesthetic beauty and a negative impact on property values (Corbett, 2015). Such “Not-in-My-Backyard” (NIMBY) mobilization is common in local politics (Senecal & Reyburn, 2006)

Redistributive policies are intended to benefit needy residents by transferring public resources to lower income segments of the local population, such as through the provision of subsidized housing (Craw, 2006; Farmer, 2011). Redistributive policy choices are contentious because they confer concentrated benefits on a small, powerless minority, while imposing costs on an attentive, influential majority (Sancton, 1986, p. 86). These political dynamics set the stage for general underfunding of social services, and create a significant hurdle for anti-poverty advocates. This dynamic was witnessed in Ottawa's 2016 budget process, in which one councillor's plea for an extra \$250,000 for social service agencies was soundly defeated by a majority of her colleagues who instead prioritized a minimal property tax increase (Porter, 2015).

Regulatory policies control or prohibit behaviours that pose potential risks to public health and safety (Raine & Dunstan, 2011) such as rules requiring that dogs be leashed, that backyard fires be contained in approved pits and that fireworks be set off only in clear, open areas. Even seemingly obscure regulatory issues can trigger highly charged political disputes, as demonstrated by heated debates in Calgary, Fredericton, Halifax, Kitchener, Moncton, Vancouver and many other cities about whether residents should be allowed to raise chickens in backyard coops (CBC News, 2009; 2011; 2012; 2013; Thompson, 2016; Tucker & Vaessen, 2015).

Finally, *symbolic policies* involve honouring or recognizing a group, event or cause without requiring any significant outlay of human or financial resources. Despite their negligible impact on the budget, symbolic policy choices can nevertheless be highly political, as exemplified by criticism levelled at the mayor and council of the Town of Montague, Prince Edward Island, for their decision in July 2016 to not fly the multi-coloured flag that marks the start of Pride Week (Yarr, 2016).

In summary, municipal governments are active policymakers, engaged in a wide range of different issues. They face difficult choices about how scarce public resources should be used and what limits should be imposed on the behaviour of residents in the public interest. As outlined in the next section, these choices flow from a relatively stable and predictable sequence of stages, by which problems come to the attention of municipal officials, options are developed and decisions are made.

The dynamics of local policymaking

To make sense of the dynamics of policymaking in the municipal arena, it is helpful to conceptualize it as a multi-staged process, involving political interactions among those who make demands, those who design policies in response, and those who are affected by these policy choices (McAllister, 2004, pp. 223–226). In this model, demands from individual citizens, pressure groups and business lobbies attract the attention of politicians and, through a process of *agenda-setting*, certain issues are selected for consideration by public authorities. As public officials mull potential responses—a process known as *policy formulation*—other political players emerge to pressure and persuade these policymakers to favour certain solutions over others. Once alternatives are identified, a *decision-making* phase begins, in which policymakers argue, bargain and negotiate until they reach a mutually agreeable course of action.

Agenda-setting

Constrained by scarce time and resources, local policymakers must necessarily focus their attention on a limited slate of issues at any particular time. Problems typically secure space on this agenda in one of two ways (Cobb et al., 1976). In an “outside initiation” pattern, vocal citizens or organized interests draw attention to a problem and cultivate support for a proposed solution, in hopes that this will stimulate active consideration by public officials. In the late 1990s, for example, a group of residents concerned about the health risks associated with pesticides formed the London (Ontario) Coalition Against Pesticides, which sought to pressure city council for a ban on cosmetic lawn care chemicals (Van Brenk, 1999a, 1999b). The coalition’s persistent lobbying—amplified through the local media—sparked years of council debate, which featured experts duelling over the science, invocation of the “precautionary principle”, and questions about

the appropriate regulatory role of municipal governments (Belanger, 2006; Van Brenk, 2001).

The converse is “inside initiation”, whereby an individual or unit within government identifies a problem, formulates a workable solution, and then puts the proposal to decision-makers for endorsement. This appears to be the predominant pattern of agenda-setting in municipal governments: most issues on the council agenda are accompanied by a staff report that provides background information, articulates the need for intervention and usually recommends a course of action (Sancton, 2014, p. 250). In 2012, for instance, Winnipeg City Council endorsed a recommendation by the City Forester to adopt a strategy to mitigate the spread of Dutch elm disease. The official’s report, which was informed by consultation with Manitoba Conservation, University of Manitoba, University of Winnipeg and two local advocacy groups, included a comprehensive problem background, an overview of expected benefits (and costs of inaction), and a detailed, fully-costed, five-year implementation plan (Winnipeg, 2012).

Often these internally generated initiatives stem from day-to-day interaction between local public managers and relevant stakeholders, or are drafted in response to emerging complaints from the public. In addition, many policy initiatives are based on ideas drawn from other local governments, which are typically discovered through an *environmental scan*—a systematic comparison of practices in comparable communities—or through informal communication among municipal administrators. In recent years, for example, local policies concerning smoking in public places, the use of cosmetic lawn pesticides, and ownership of “dangerous” dogs have spread across municipal boundaries through a process described by scholars as *policy diffusion* or *policy transfer* (Nykiforuk et al., 2008; Wolman & Page, 2002)

Occasionally a sudden, striking incident acts as a “triggering mechanism” to push an otherwise obscure issue onto the policy agenda (Gerston, 2004, chap. 2). These “focusing events”, which cause harm or reveal the possibility of future harm, rapidly attract public and political attention to a problem and signal the need for corrective action (Birkland and DeYoung, 2013). In Toronto, for instance, a massive explosion and fire at a propane plant in 2008 forced the evacuation of 10,000 nearby residents and closed Highway 401, one of the busiest traffic arteries in North America. The event triggered a comprehensive public safety review of the city’s zoning bylaws for industrial areas (Spears, 2008), an initiative that neither the council nor staff had contemplated prior to the explosion. By attracting public and political attention to a problem and creating a sense of urgency to act, focusing events present a short window of opportunity for advocates to get an issue onto the municipal agenda and to promote their preferred policy solution (Henstra, 2010).

Policy formulation

Policy formulation involves generating plausible policy choices to address a problem and assessing their feasibility (Wu et al., 2010, p. 29). In the local political system, the policy formulation process is sometimes triggered from above, when members of council identify an issue and direct staff to conduct research and bring back a recommendation. In other cases, policy formulation proceeds from below, as when a problem is detected by municipal staff within departments, who then formulate a proposal for policy change.

Previous Canadian research suggests that stakeholder and public participation plays a central role in local policy formulation (Fowler & Siegel, 2002, p. 11). For example, in the domain of municipal cultural policy, which involves choices about arts, culture and heritage, Cardinal (2002) found that policy development involved extensive engagement between municipal staff, artists and the public, which enhanced the legitimacy of the courses of action ultimately selected. Similarly, policy development processes aimed at increasing urban resilience to climate change in both Toronto and Halifax included numerous public engagement forums, which permitted residents to comment on draft proposals and offer alternative policy ideas (Henstra, 2012). If executed well, stakeholder and public engagement can broaden understanding of policy initiatives and generate support for further policy development (Simpson and Bretherton, 2010; Walters et al., 2000).

The range of feasible policy solutions available to municipal governments is influenced by pressure groups, such as neighbourhood associations, community service clubs and merchant's associations, which lobby for courses of action that serve their interests (Graham et al., 1998, pp. 127–133). Because municipal councillors generally represent small constituencies, are not members of political parties, and are thus not subject to party discipline, lobbying efforts by pressure groups can exert considerable influence over their policy choices (Filion, 1992). For instance, neighbourhood associations frequently mobilize to oppose choices considered by municipal councils—land use changes, the siting of undesirable facilities, and so on—which are perceived to pose a threat to the interests of residents in a particular geographical area (Sénécal, 2002).

Decision-making

Before going to council for a decision, proposals generated by municipal staff are typically first submitted to a standing committee, a small group of councillors which reviews and discusses the details of staff reports and then makes a recommendation to council (Tindal et al., 2016, p. 247). In some communities, particularly large cities, policy proposals contained in staff reports might also be reviewed by a chief administrative officer (or city manager), who then forwards them to council along with comments based on his or her experience, substantive

knowledge of local government issues, and longer-term perspective (Siegel, 2010, p. 152).

In considering policy decisions, Lightbody argues, councillors typically focus on “down-to-earth matters”, such as the impact on a limited budget, whether new taxes or fees will be required, and whether the administration has the necessary resources, expertise and technology to implement the plan (2006, p. 87). Also important to municipal decision-makers is the balance of support and opposition among local “social forces”—the business community, residents’ associations, issue-specific advocacy groups, social service organizations, and so on—which can sometimes represent sizeable constituencies such that they command consideration by municipal politicians (Horak, 2012, pp. 358–359)

In 2015, for instance, Calgary City Council endorsed a staff proposal for a Pawn Shop and Payday Loan Separation Policy, which imposed a 400-metre separation distance between payday lenders and pawn shops in order to avoid “clustering” that could create “negative perceptions” of neighbourhoods and have a “negative aesthetic impact on the streetscape” (Calgary Planning Commission, 2015). In considering the decision, councillors weighed the results of a public consultation session (which indicated largely negative perceptions of payday lenders), letters of support from two non-profit advocacy organizations committed to fighting poverty, and letters of opposition from the Canadian Payday Loan Association and the Consumers Council of Canada. Despite opposition from a single councillor, the policy was adopted by majority vote (Calgary, 2015).

Although Canadian mayors have few formal powers that distinguish them from councillors, they can often marshal informal resources, which can be used to provide a “guiding force” among the diverse beliefs, interests, preferences and personalities of municipal policymakers (Svara, 1990, p. 82). For instance, mayors have higher media visibility than other municipal officials, represent a broader constituency than other council members (due to at-large elections), generally serve in a full-time capacity, and typically participate in multiple committees of council (Sancton, 1994). Mayors can leverage this public exposure and greater political activity to promote their preferred policy approaches and build support among councillors (Morgan & Watson, 1992; Teles, 2014). For example, in May 2016, Halifax mayor Michael Savage organized a city-wide bike ride to draw public and political attention to his personal policy priority, cycling safety, which he linked to good health, a clean environment and lower traffic congestion. A local cycling advocacy group heralded the “good symbolic support” from the mayor as a sign of strong leadership (Mutton, 2016).

As this section has demonstrated, municipal policymaking usually involves a number of steps, and these approximate the typical analytical model of policy development as a multi-staged process (Howlett et al., 2009; Theodoulou, 1995). It is notable, however, that some municipal policy choices do not emerge from an orderly sequence of stages as depicted above, but rather from the personal priorities and preferences of individual decision-makers, who seek the support of local staff to create a business case for implementation. Regardless of the path

by which an issue arrives on their work plan, non-partisan municipal public servants have a duty to provide both technically sound and politically neutral policy advice based on the best available evidence (Siegel, 1994). The capacity of municipal public servants to fulfill this analytical demand and its importance for local governance is addressed in the next section.

Local policy analytical capacity

Designing courses of action to address local public problems demands a robust *policy analytical capacity*, meaning the ability to acquire relevant knowledge through qualitative and quantitative research, generate and evaluate options in support of medium- and long-term plans, engage stakeholders and the public, and communicate recommendations to decision-makers (Howlett, 2009a ; 2015). High policy analytical capacity, it is argued, requires a demand (or “market”) for research, a supply of skilled researchers, high-quality data and data analysis, and “policies and procedures to facilitate productive interactions with other researchers” (Riddell, 1998, p. 5).

Strong policy analytical capacity at the municipal level is important for several reasons. First, local policy decisions that are supported by rigorous analysis are more able to withstand professional challenge and are less likely to invite appeals to higher decision-making venue (for example, provincial governments) (Fellegi, 1996; Holyoke et al., 2012). Second, staff reports that contain sophisticated analysis are less likely to be disregarded by elected councillors who opt to pursue their political interests and instincts instead of the recommendations from municipal public servants.

Third, because municipal governments lack the resources to tackle many big social and economic challenges independently, their policy responses typically require collaboration with provincial and federal governments (Horak & Young, 2012; Roberts, 2000). Armed with convincing analysis, municipal officials are better able to articulate the scope, urgency and impact of problems, which strengthens their bargaining position when lobbying for financial, technical and logistical support from higher-level governments.

Finally, in an era of perpetual fiscal scarcity and an atmosphere of heightened media and public attention to perceived waste, it is increasingly important for all governments, including municipalities, to demonstrate value for money by evaluating policy and programme performance (Behn, 2003). With access to relevant, accurate and timely data, as well as a robust capacity to analyze and interpret them, municipal governments are better able to systematically monitor social and economic conditions in order to evaluate whether objectives are being achieved (Sheikh, 2011). This, in turn, strengthens democratic accountability, because stakeholders and the public have information necessary to assess government performance (Taylor, 2016, p. 6).

Previous research suggests that, in even the largest Canadian cities, policy analytical capacity is “immature”, due to a paucity of local knowledge-generating

researchers, the absence of municipal-specific think tanks to serve as knowledge brokers, and weak demand among local decision-makers for sophisticated, rigorous analysis (Stewart & Smith, 2007). It is said that local elected councils have difficulty providing clear and precise direction on policy issues, which makes it more difficult for municipal staff to generate viable courses of action (Siegel, 1994). Unlike the federal and provincial governments, which employ thousands of policy analysts, municipal governments typically recruit professional experts such as engineers, planners and accountants rather than generalists trained in the objectives and techniques of policy analysis (Sancton & Sams, 2010). Although these municipal experts provide valuable technical advice, they may be less well-equipped to advise decision-makers on broader considerations, such as *political feasibility* (support or opposition among powerful interests), *social acceptability* (the level of public support or opposition), *economic efficiency* (whether benefits outweigh costs), and *equity* (the distribution of benefits and burdens). Furthermore, Taylor (2016, pp. 16–17) notes that “in all but the largest municipalities, the relatively small size of local bureaucracies limits their capacity to engage in policy innovation.”

Despite these findings, municipal policy analysis has received relatively little research attention from Canadian social scientists. Rich, survey-based research has generated unique insights into the competencies, behaviours and tasks of federal and provincial policy workers, but it is unclear whether the findings of these studies are also generalizable to municipal policy work (Howlett, 2009b; Howlett & Newman, 2010; Wellstead et al., 2009). Analysts have likened “policy advice systems” to “a kind of marketplace for policy ideas and information” (Howlett, 2011a, p. 33), which includes both a *demand* for policy analysis among those with the authority to make decisions, and a *supply* of policy-relevant information and analysis generated by knowledge-producers (Howlett & Newman, 2010; Prince, 2007). Moreover, it is recognized that “the nature of knowledge supply and demand” within policy advice systems differs from one jurisdiction to another (Howlett, 2011b, p. 250). The next sections examine the demand for analysis and its supply in the municipal policy advice system, drawing on findings of a pilot study of municipal policy analytical capacity.

Demand for policy analysis in local government

In order to illuminate the demand side of the municipal policy advice system, this study sought to answer two questions. First, what are the policy-relevant qualifications in demand by Canadian local governments? To investigate this question 32 employment advertisements were collected and analyzed to assess municipal government expectations concerning the education, skills, professional qualities and tasks of policy workers. Second, what specific forms of analysis do municipal decision-makers demand when contemplating policy choices? Evidence to answer this question was collected from municipal council minutes and committee reports and through 15 semi-structured interviews with municipal policy workers.

General demand

The demand for education credentials varied across the employment advertisements, though most municipalities sought candidates with a university degree. Only one job posting, in this case from a small municipality, set a high school diploma as the minimum education requirement. As summarized in Table 6.1, the most frequently specified academic disciplines were Public Administration (34.4%) and Business Administration (28.1%), followed by Economics, Planning and Political Science (all at 15.6%). These disciplines roughly parallel the predominant academic subject areas studied by provincial policy analysts, as reported by Howlett (2009c), who found the five leading degrees to be Political Science, Business Management, Economics, Public Administration and Sociology. The one anomalous discipline here—Planning—reflects a heavy emphasis at the municipal level on developmental policy, which involves strategic decisions about land use, economic development and growth (Fowler, 1992).

Table 6.1: Education sought among municipal policy workers

Degree	#	%	Degree	#	%
Public administration	11	34.4	Environmental science	2	6.3
Business administration	9	28.1	Social sciences	2	6.3
Economics	5	15.6	High school diploma	1	3.1
Planning	5	15.6	Geography	1	3.1
Political science	5	15.6	Health	1	3.1
Public policy	4	12.5	Journalism	1	3.1
Finance	2	6.3	Public health	1	3.1
Law	2	6.3	Social work	1	3.1

Employment advertisements highlighted more than two dozen specific skills sought by hiring managers as qualifications for municipal policy work (Table 6.2). The five most prominent skills—each appearing in at least one-quarter of the postings—were *strong written and verbal communication*, *analytical capacity*, *teamwork*, the ability to *work independently*, and *research*. This is not entirely surprising, given that these competencies are considered important for most contemporary public service positions, and at all levels of government (Ontario, 2004; Public Service Commission of Canada, 2011). More specifically, however, they mirror the skills and behavioural competencies identified as important for policy development work at the federal and provincial level, as evidenced in public service recruitment materials (for example, Alberta, 2016; Canada, 2016; Ontario, 2016).

The low frequency of some of the other skills, such as *statistical analysis* and *programme evaluation*, suggest that these are less prominent aspects of municipal policy work. These findings parallel those of studies of provincial policy work

in Canada, which concluded that statistical analysis is among the least frequently used analytical techniques (Howlett, 2009c) and that evaluation is of lower importance among the skill sets deemed critical for provincial policy analysts (Howlett & Wellstead, 2011).

Table 6.2: Skills expected of municipal policy workers

Skill	#	%	Skill	#	%
Communication skills	13	40.6	Collaboration	4	12.5
Analytical skills	10	31.3	Data analysis	3	9.4
Teamwork	10	31.3	Economic analysis	3	9.4
Working independently	9	28.1	Problem solving	3	9.4
Research	8	25.0	Managing partnerships	3	9.4
Interpersonal skills	6	18.8	Meeting deadlines	2	6.3
Explaining options	6	18.8	Strategic planning	2	6.3
Organizational skills	5	15.6	Statistical analysis	2	6.3
Presentation	5	15.6	Demographic forecasting	2	6.3
Project management	5	15.6	Interpreting legislation	2	6.3
Self-management	5	15.6	Business planning	1	3.1
Prioritization	4	12.5	Programme evaluation	1	3.1
Report writing	4	12.5			

In addition to skills, 14 different professional qualities of new municipal policy recruits were identified (Table 6.3). Among these, the most frequently occurring included *personal initiative*—defined in psychology literature as “an active and self-starting approach to work goals and tasks” (Fay & Frese, 2001, p. 97)—a *commitment to customer service*, and *flexibility and adaptability* (typically with reference to a “fast-paced work environment” and “changing political conditions”). The demand for these traits among hiring managers suggests that municipal policy work involves independent projects, requires interaction with the public and takes place in a dynamic operating atmosphere.

Table 6.3: Professional qualities sought in municipal policy workers

Quality	#	%	Quality	#	%
Initiative	10	31.3	Creativity	4	12.5
Customer service orientation	9	28.1	Resourcefulness	3	9.4
Flexibility and adaptability	9	28.1	Embrace challenge	2	6.3
Accountability	6	18.8	Discretion	2	6.3
Strategic thinking	6	18.8	Objectivity	1	3.1
Attention to detail	4	12.5	Judgement	1	3.1
Innovation	4	12.5	Motivation	1	3.1

Successful candidates selected for policy-related posts in local government are expected to fulfill a range of duties. The analysis of employment advertisements revealed 26 specific tasks associated with municipal policy work (Table 6.4). One-third of the job notices listed *research* and *data analysis* as important policy development functions, which suggests that municipal policy work involves finding and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data to support policy proposals. This emphasis on research and data analysis approximates the findings of a study of provincial and territorial policy analysts, which identified “collecting policy-related data or information” and “conducting policy-related research” to be among their most frequently performed tasks (Howlett & Wellstead, 2013, p. 766)

Specific demand

Interviewees were asked about the information that elected officials want to see when considering policy decisions, and several specific forms of analysis were mentioned consistently. The financial and human resources required to implement policy proposals appears to be the chief consideration among municipal decision-makers, based on the frequency of its mention among informants, and staff report templates typically include a section for this analysis (Interviews 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11 and 15). This is perhaps unsurprising, given the scarce operating resources of municipal governments and their limited capacity to raise revenue, which is essentially restricted to property taxes and minor user fees (Siegel, 2002).

A second analytical demand by municipal decision-makers when considering a proposed policy is for information about the balance of support or opposition among stakeholders and the public (Interviews 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, 10 and 11). Councillors show particular interest in which individuals and groups have formally registered as delegations to appear before Council to articulate their interests, because these actors are most likely to actively support or oppose the policy if implemented (Interviews 3 and 5). Third, municipal councils commonly inquire about what other communities are doing about the issue under active consideration, which informants suggested was a means to both benchmark their own municipality’s actions and to gauge the priority of the issue relative to other pressing matters (Interviews 2, 5, 7, 8 and 14). Finally, other decision-support factors important to municipal decision-makers include how the policy proposal connects with priorities in the community’s strategic plan (Interviews 5, 12 and 13) and the expected measurable impacts of its adoption, particularly for their own constituents (Interviews 6, 7 and 8).

To summarize, in many ways the demand for policy analysis at the municipal level resembles that at the provincial level. Expectations concerning the education credentials, skills, professional qualities and work tasks of new municipal policy recruits are similar to the characteristics reported by provincial policy workers (though the order of their priority varies). The analytical demands placed on municipal policy workers by elected decision-makers—information on financial implications, support and opposition, initiatives elsewhere, and so on—are also

important for provincial policy choices, but have a distinctly local flavour. The next section explores the supply of policy analysis in municipal governments.

Table 6.4: Tasks expected of municipal policy workers

Task	#	%	Task	#	%
Research	11	34.4	Work with consultants	4	12.5
Data analysis	11	34.4	Financial analysis	3	9.4
Public consultation	10	31.3	Communications	3	9.4
Writing council reports	7	21.9	Forecasting	2	6.3
Liaising with departments	6	18.8	Project management	2	6.3
Strategic planning	5	15.6	Market research	2	6.3
Business planning	5	15.6	Jurisdictional scan	2	6.3
Brainstorming	4	12.5	Issues management	1	3.1
Writing committee reports	4	12.5	Policy evaluation	1	3.1
Presentations	4	12.5	Economic analysis	1	3.1
Writing briefing notes	4	12.5	Information management	1	3.1
Project coordination	4	12.5	Financial modeling	1	3.1
Policy implementation	4	12.5			
Trend analysis	4	12.5			

The supply of policy analysis in local government

The study also sought to understand the supply side of the municipal policy advice system, with a focus on the specific analytical techniques used by local policy workers and the manner in which policy advice is communicated to decision-makers. Evidence was collected by reviewing staff reports submitted to municipal councils as part of their meeting packages, and through 15 semi-structured interviews with municipal policy workers.

Analytical techniques

When asked about the methods used to assess and compare potential courses of action, municipal policy workers identified 18 specific analytical techniques (Table 6.5). Among these, the most frequently mentioned (cited by all but one of the interviewees) was the *environmental scan*—an assessment of whether and how other municipalities had addressed an issue. Each community had a formal or informal list of its typical comparators, selected based on population size, governance structure (single-tier or two-tier) and geography. Interviewees found environmental scanning useful to identify parties that might activate around a policy issue, to discern best practices, and to build support for action in their own jurisdiction.

Table 6.5: Analytical tools used by municipal policy workers

Technique	#	%	Technique	#	%
Environmental scan	14	43.8	Focus groups	1	3.1
Cost-benefit analysis	8	25.0	Geographic information systems	1	3.1
SWOT analysis	6	18.8	Literature review	1	3.1
Public consultation	5	15.6	Programme evaluation	1	3.1
Stakeholder engagement	5	15.6	Scenarios	1	3.1
Statistical analysis	3	9.4	Staff consultation	1	3.1
Review of best practices	1	3.1	Surveys	1	3.1
Checklists	1	3.1	Think tank	1	3.1
Consult university researchers	1	3.1	Willingness to pay survey	1	3.1

Cost-benefit analysis was noted by four interviewees as a second important tool for weighing policy options and displaying the resulting assessment in monetary terms (Interviews 2, 6, 8 and 14). However, the utility of cost-benefit analysis for municipal policy development appears contingent on the type of policy issue under consideration. Whereas the four proponents of cost-benefit analysis were engaged primarily with allocative and developmental policy issues, four other interviewees dealt primarily with redistributive issues (for example, homelessness), for which they found cost-benefit analysis to be inappropriate (because political considerations outweigh economic criteria) or ineffective (due to the impracticality of monetizing social costs and benefits) (Interviews 4, 9, 10 and 11).

A third technique, *SWOT analysis*, the acronym of which stands for strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats, was identified by six interviewees as an important tool for municipal policy appraisal (Interviews 1, 3, 8, 9, 11 and 13). Applied to public policy development, SWOT analysis involves a structured approach to evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of a proposal relative to others, as well as identifying elements in the social, political and economic environment that might present opportunities to enhance policy success, or pose threats that could lead to policy ineffectiveness or policy failure (Berte & Panagopoulos, 2014; Fertel et al., 2013). According to municipal informants, the results of SWOT analysis provide a useful framework to select among competing policy approaches.

Five of the interviewees identified *public consultation* as an important tool of municipal policy analysis, while another five reported that *stakeholder engagement* was a regular component of the policy development process. With respect to the former, the business community, non-profit service providers, residents' and neighbourhood associations and nearby municipalities were listed as key stakeholders whose interests were relevant to varying degrees depending on the policy issue. Stakeholder engagement was achieved through several means, including open information sessions, focus groups, household surveys and an online engagement portal.

Communicating policy advice

Another consideration on the supply side of the local policy advice system is the way in which information is communicated to decision-makers. A review of staff reports submitted to councils in several municipalities suggests that there are subtle variations in the way policy proposals are presented. In all cases, the reports highlighted a recommended course of action on the issue, offered a rationale for this recommendation, and provided some supporting documentation (for example, results of environmental scan; highlights of public consultation). However, the amount of information and specificity of advice in the reports varied, which appeared to be a function of the template used by the municipality. For example, a 2013 staff report that proposed a Rental Housing Licensing By-law in Hamilton, Ontario, provided a policy rationale—to document and regulate illegal rental units—but also a historical background, implementation plan, statement of alignment with the city's strategic plan, and three alternative courses of action that council could consider (and why these were deemed inferior to the recommendation) (Hamilton, 2013). Although typical of staff policy proposals in Hamilton, this level of detail was not found in other municipalities.

Interviewees suggested that municipal decision-makers generally prefer to receive a single recommendation, because it helps to focus their discussion (Interviews 2, 5 and 7). However, councillors typically inquire about alternative approaches that were (or might have been) considered (Interviews 10, 11 and 13). In addition, policy proposals submitted for decision often follow from an earlier exchange with councillors about an issue, in which staff seek direction about terms of reference for formulating a solution (Interviews 3 and 4). In this way, elected officials are already primed before a policy recommendation appears on their decision agenda.

As this section has demonstrated, the supply of policy-relevant information and analysis in the local political system is underpinned by a range of different techniques. The predominant tool used to identify policy options is a systematic scan of practices in other municipalities, which suggests that *lesson-drawing*—designing a course of action based on those undertaken in other jurisdictions (Rose, 1993, p. 21)—is an important part of local policy development. The way in which policy recommendations are presented is an important aspect of the supply of policy advice, because it can shape the scope and substance of debate and bias decision-makers towards one course of action over others. It was noted here that the form and content of documents used by municipal staff to present policy proposals to council vary from one community to another. The impact that this variation has on policy decisions deserves further research attention.

Conclusion

Local governments are important policy actors in Canada's political system. They regularly make binding choices about services provided to residents, the

use of land, the redistribution of resources among residents, behaviours deemed acceptable, and whether to officially recognize groups, events or causes. These choices typically flow from a relatively predictable sequence of stages—agenda-setting, policy formulation, decision-making, and so on—which involves regular interaction between elected politicians and permanent, politically neutral public servants. Municipal decision-makers are supported by a local policy advice system, the characteristics of which resemble in many ways its federal and provincial counterparts, but which features a smaller scale (that is, fewer analysts) and a distinctly local flavour (as evidenced in the greater importance of stakeholder and public engagement).

Despite the importance of municipal policies and the unique context of municipal policymaking, local policy analysis has received less research attention from Canadian social scientists than policy work at the federal and provincial level. This chapter has illuminated the nature and dynamics of policymaking in local government, including the types of issues municipal governments deal with, the process by which ideas and demands are translated into courses of action, the demand for policy advice by elected councillors and the supply of information provided by policy analysts. The research conducted for the chapter provided insights into the education credentials, skills and qualities deemed desirable by municipal governments seeking new policy recruits, as well as their expectations about the tasks that they want policy workers to perform. In addition, the study identified a range of analytical tools used by municipal policy analysts, and discovered that a small number of these tools predominate in municipal policy work. However, these findings are exploratory in nature. It is clear that further research on municipal policy analysis is necessary to better understand its similarities and differences vis-à-vis policy analysis at other levels of government.

Note

- ¹ The precautionary principle is a general rule of conduct whereby policymakers justify the regulation of actions or behaviours suspected of being a risk to public health and safety, even in the absence of scientific consensus.

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