

Article

## At the Intersection of Equity and Innovation: Trans Inclusion in the City of Vancouver

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### Abstract

In 2016, the Vancouver City Council passed the Supporting Trans\* Equality and an Inclusive Vancouver policy, a motion that prompted the development of a strategy aimed at ensuring the safety and accessibility of municipal programs, services, and physical spaces for Two-Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse (TGD2S) users, including residents, City staff, and visitors. Binary gender is a taken-for-granted assumption of most urban forms and functions: It is encoded in all municipal data collection forms, building codes, signage, and communication strategies. At its root, then, addressing trans inclusion requires the municipal government to attend to and redesign the gendered models of service, programs, and space upon which the city is built. This article tells the story of the Supporting Trans\* Equality and an Inclusive Vancouver policy and is driven by two goals. First, I document this policy as a contribution to the urban policy and planning literature, where attention to gender diversity is due. Second, using the trans inclusion strategy, I show how a municipal equity policy aimed at addressing the safety and inclusion of TGD2S people can have significant impacts beyond its immediate scope. To develop this idea, I consider how equity-driven innovation can substantially reshape institutional practices.

### Keywords

equity; gender diversity; inclusive cities; innovatory urban governance; LGBTQ; municipal policy; transgender

### Issue

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### 1. Introduction

In 2016, the Vancouver City Council passed the Supporting Trans\* Equality and an Inclusive Vancouver motion (also referred to here as the Supporting Trans\* Equality policy or TGD2S strategy), a strategy that aims to make the City of Vancouver a safer place for Two-Spirit, trans, and gender-diverse (TGD2S) people who seek services and work. For a group of people whose encounters with city services are often shaped by exclusion, harassment, and discrimination (Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, 2014, p. 8), this strategy was a remarkable achievement. Its purpose—to ensure that municipal programs, services, and physical spaces are safe and accessible to TGD2S users (whether residents, visitors, or City staff)—stands in stark contrast to the myriad anti-trans laws and policies that have proliferated in

North America and beyond during the same period. For the City of Vancouver, the Supporting Trans\* Equality policy demonstrated the City’s local and global leadership in working toward creating meaningful pathways to inclusion (City of Vancouver, 2016, p. 9).

TGD2S people are often grouped with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer communities under the LGBTQ2S+ acronym; however, these groups share overlapping but distinct concerns and needs. While municipalities have acknowledged the “LGBQ” part of the acronym, or sexual diversity, in an uneven fashion (Bain & Podmore, 2021), the acknowledgment of gender diversity is even more scarce (a gap that is replicated in the literature). The Supporting Trans\* Equality policy is unique in its intervention for gender-diverse communities: Trans, which refers to people whose gender identity is different from their assigned sex; gender

diverse (including non-binary), which includes people whose gender expressions and identities do not conform to a male/female gender binary; and Two-Spirit, who are Indigenous and whose gender identity is both male/female, masculine/feminine (Hunt, 2016). TGD2S people face persistent discrimination when trying to access even the most basic municipal services. Consider the following scenarios: Trying to participate in recreational programming with a preferred name and being refused because this name does not align with legal identification; or, wanting to use a change room that aligns with one's gender identity and facing hostility from both staff and other recreation centre users when that effort fails. In these scenarios, each of these "sites" of City services—programming, spaces, signage, forms, and staff training—contain potential barriers that, shaped by binary gender norms, work to exclude residents, staff, and visitors.

At the same time, TGD2S voices have been historically absent from the planning table and there have been few avenues through which TGD2S people have been invited to participate in shaping urban futures. While appreciating TGD2S lives through a strengths-based lens is vital to resisting damage-centred narratives (Nash, 2010; Todd, 2021; Tuck, 2009), it is also necessary to understand the everyday impacts of anti-trans hostility. As Kline et al. (2023) write, trans people experience a wide range of physical and mental health disparities compared to a cisgender population. These disparities, they note, "exist in a social context of stigma and social exclusion" (Kline et al., 2023, p. 2) alongside a sharp increase in anti-trans legislation, particularly in the US and the UK (Kinney et al., 2022).

In British Columbia, gender identity and expression are protected grounds under the provincial human rights code. This amendment, made in 2016, was characterized as necessary for clarity of interpretation about the types of discrimination TGD2S people face, and to be consistent with human rights legislation across Canada ("B.C. Human Rights Code," 2016). As human rights lawyer Laura Track writes for the BC Human Rights Clinic: "The inclusion of gender identity and expression in the Code means that employers, landlords, and service providers must act to prevent and respond to discrimination against trans people" (Track, 2020, para. 5) For municipalities, as employers, service providers and occasionally landlords, enacting policy to support trans inclusion aligns with a broader policy landscape. Moreover, policy that directly confronts discrimination and aims "to protect and expand resources and opportunities" works alongside legal human rights protections to change social norms (Kinney et al., 2022, p. 493). Yet, few municipalities have addressed trans inclusion explicitly.

This article explores the origin and policy-related impacts of one such intervention in the City of Vancouver. I tell the story of the Supporting Trans\* Equality policy driven by two questions: What was the policy development process of the TGD2S strategy? And what, if

any, policy-related impacts have the TGD2S strategy had? The aim of this article is twofold. The first goal is to document this policy as a contribution to the urban policy and planning literature, where attention to gender diversity is due. Second, using the TGD2S strategy, I show how a municipal equity policy aimed at addressing the safety and inclusion of TGD2S people can have significant impacts beyond its immediate scope. To develop this idea, I consider how equity policy can serve as an innovation tool: I link literature on equity and urban innovation in municipal governance to illustrate how one inclusion strategy can substantially reshape institutional practices.

The path of the article is as follows. An explanation of methods is followed by a snapshot of the Supporting Trans\* Equality policy, which is couched in a discussion of how I understand and approach trans inclusion in the context of municipal policy and planning. Then, I explore two sets of literature—equity and urban innovation at the municipal scale—as a conceptual framework to support a subsequent, more thorough discussion of the TGD2S strategy: Its origins, its adoption, and the outcomes that have emerged from the ways this policy has become embedded into the broader organizational mandate of the City. Using this conceptual lens, I consider how an equity strategy can function as innovation by substantially reshaping institutional practices for the benefit of everyone, including its intended target.

## 2. Methods

This analysis was developed through an examination of open-source documents available through the City of Vancouver's website. I used four search functions available through the City's website: A general search feature; a "find Council documents" function; an "information from in-camera meetings" search feature; and the archived web contents available on the Archive-It site. These tools allowed me to create a database of more than 30 relevant policy and strategy documents from the years 2013–2022: These include seven administrative reports, nine memoranda and correspondence documents, multiple sets of meeting minutes from the Park Board and Council that focus on TGD2S and related strategies, four municipal budget and five-year service plans, advisory committee terms of reference, annual reports, working plans, and web pages (for a partial list of documents used in this analysis see Table 1). All of these documents were publicly available, and no retrieval assistance from City staff or advisory members was sought. Supporting supplementary materials, such as media coverage of outcomes that emerged from the TGD2S strategy, were also added to the database. These documents were reviewed and coded using an inductive coding process (Saldaña, 2013).

Since the focus of this article is to tell a story about the trajectory of a policy and its policy-related effects, I present the story of trans inclusion from one angle that sticks closely to the data presented in staff reports and

**Table 1.** Select database contents from the City of Vancouver and Vancouver Park Board.

Document title	Document no. (if applicable)	Date	Document type
Park Board Committee Meeting Minutes	—	13 May 2013	Meeting minutes
<i>Trans* and Gender Variant Experience of and Ideas for Vancouver Survey</i>	—	2013	Community survey
General Manager's Recommendation	—	17 April 2014	Recommendation to the Park Board from the general manager of Parks and Recreation
<i>Building a Path to Parks &amp; Recreation for All: Reducing Barriers for Trans* &amp; Gender Variant Community Members</i>	—	April 2014	Report
Park Board Committee Meeting Minutes	—	28 April 2014	Meeting minutes
<i>Annual Report LGBTQ Advisory Committee</i>	—	December 2014	Summary presentation
Trans* and Gender Variant Inclusion Steering Committee TOR	—	2015	Committee terms of reference
Supporting Trans Equality and an Inclusive Vancouver	—	July 2015	Motion on notice
<i>Chief Human Resources Officer Recommendation</i>	RTS no. 11065, VanRIMS no. 08-2000-20	8 June 2016	Administrative report
<i>Trans*, Gender Variant, and Two-Spirit Inclusion at the City of Vancouver</i>	—	July 2016	Report
TGVI Annual Report & Corporate Sponsorship Fund Request	—	October 2016	Presentation to the Park Board
Annual Report to Council—Advisory Committees	—	23 December 2016	Memorandum
2017–2018 Work Plan of the LGBTQ2+ Advisory Committee	—	—	Work plan of the committee and sub-committees
<i>Annual Progress Update on Work Related to the Staff Report on Supporting Trans* Equality and an Inclusive Vancouver</i>	RTS no. 11582, VanRIMS no. 08-2000-20	2 June 2017	Administrative report
Annual Report to Council—Advisory Committees	—	26 January 2018	Memorandum
Annual Progress Update on Work Related to the Staff Report on Supporting Trans* Equality and an Inclusive Vancouver	RTS. no. 12526	6 July 2018	Memorandum
<i>Interim Report to the Standing Committee on City Finance and Services</i>	RTS no. 12960, VanRIMS no. 08-2000-20	9 April 2019	Administrative report

**Table 1.** (Cont.) Select database contents from the City of Vancouver and Vancouver Park Board.

Document title	Document no. (if applicable)	Date	Document type
2020 Budget and Five-Year Financial Plan	—	December 2019	Public-facing budget document
Memo: Updates on Women’s Equity Strategy and Trans Gender Diverse and Two Spirit Inclusion Strategy	RTS no. 1334	12 November 2020	City Manager’s correspondence
Updates on Women’s Equity Strategy and Trans Gender Diverse and Two Spirit Inclusion Strategy	RTS no. 1334	13 May 2021	Memorandum
Recommendation From the General Manager of Arts Culture and Community Services and the Chief Equity Officer	RTS no. 14507, VanRIMS no. 08–2000–20	22 June 2021	Memorandum introducing the report
<i>Equity Framework</i>	—	22 June 2021	Report
Vancouver Budget 2022 Service Plans	—	No date	Public-facing budget document
Update on Women’s Equity Strategy	—	7 March 2022	Memorandum

public-facing policy documents. This is neither an exhaustive approach, nor is it without limitations. Notably, this story does not give voice to TGD2S staff or residents about their perspective of policy implementation and impact. TGD2S voices included here are those who were documented during the process of policy development. Likewise, there is no attention paid here to the relationship between trans-inclusion policy development and the role of the Vancouver Police Department as a stakeholder in the city process. While the Vancouver Police Department did not play a central role in the TGD2S strategy, they participated in limited consultations through their role as an affiliate institution. Many TGD2S people, especially racialized TGD2S communities, have a learned distrust of police as a result of persistent negative encounters (Lee & Santiago, 2023). Given these relations, it is likely that some TGD2S people would not feel welcome to participate in a policy development process where the Vancouver Police Department may be present. This question is worth exploring but it is outside the scope of this article.

### 3. Trans Inclusion and the TGD2S Strategy

The origin story of the TGD2S strategy began with policies and actions undertaken for trans inclusion in 2014 by the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation (also referred to as Park Board) and the Vancouver Board of Education (also referred to as School Board), two organizations whose jurisdictions and operations have financial attachments to the City but operate independently in

their decision-making. Both pursued a path to make their organizations more welcoming and inclusive. In the case of the School Board, this path was contentious: During the consultation to update their anti-discrimination policy, angry opposition resulted from efforts to protect LGBTQ students, staff, and families and address trans and gender-diverse members of the school community (Leung, 2017). For the Park Board, the story was different. In 2013, the Park Board voted unanimously to strike a working group “to provide a report to the Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation detailing how Vancouver can be the world’s most inclusive jurisdiction for trans and gender-variant communities” (Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, 2013, p. 3). The content of the report returned to the Park Board in 2014 is detailed further on; it became the basis for the TGD2S strategy, which sought to scale up the work begun by the Park and School Boards. Accepted by the Council in June 2016, the actions contained in the strategy require the municipal government to attend to and redesign implicitly gendered models of service, programs, and spaces.

Indeed, the assumption of binary gender is part of the municipal fabric: It is encoded in municipal data collection forms, building codes, signage, and communication strategies. For a staff person, resident, or visitor whose gender identity or presentation does not align or is not read by others as conforming with dominant modes of masculinity and femininity, trying to access programs, services, and spaces can be alienating or worse. A common sentiment from TGD2S respondents who were surveyed about their park usage was avoidance.

One respondent stated: “I frequently avoid going to the gym or going swimming if I don’t have a friend with me, due to fears of being confronted/harassed in the change rooms” (Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, 2014, p. 15). Many who are welcomed under an LGBTQ umbrella may face similar issues, but the challenges posed by binary gender illustrate the specific needs of TGD2S communities that “are all too often erased from supposedly ‘LGBTQ’ struggles” (Browne et al., 2021, p. 4).

What does TGD2S inclusion mean? Conceptually, I approach TGD2S inclusion from the perspective of gender and sexual citizenship, which refers to the embodied experiences, discourses, and material practices of inclusion and exclusion for certain bodies on the basis of adhering to or rejecting gender and sexual norms. Exclusion can thus take the shape of policies and practices (for instance, forms with limited categories) or be experienced as a repetition of the message “you don’t belong here.” In other words, the state is not the only entity with the power to enforce inclusion and exclusion. Importantly, this captures the everyday experience of discrimination faced by trans and gender-diverse people. When engaged about access to park board spaces, one respondent stated: “I am constantly being told that the washroom I am in is a women’s washroom. I am a gay, young, androgynous female. These changes are necessary....We all go into any toilet to do the same thing” (Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, 2014, p. 29).

Inclusion often implies a rights-based framework; indeed, exclusion on the basis of gender identity and expression contravenes a person’s human rights in British Columbia and Canada. A rights-based framework is complicated for several reasons, however. First, the rationale for assigning rights is often tied to claims for social justice and recognition as a “class” deserving of rights. Yet, recognition necessarily requires inclusion and exclusion criteria (Bain & Podmore, 2021, p. 1647). In a system predicated on a gender binary, the emphasis has been on drawing boundaries around who fits within a deserving class (women, for example). The upshot is that “gender fluidity becomes further silenced through legal and social policies around trans\* that reproduce traditional frameworks that foreground authentic binary gender” (Hines & Santos, 2018, p. 39). This has negative consequences for trans people, whose “authenticity” may be called into question. It also has negative consequences for gender-diverse, non-binary, and Two-Spirit people who simply do not fit into this framework.

Despite these complexities, the focus on rights is an important strategy. Hostility toward TGD2S people has been on the rise (Kinney et al., 2022; Kline et al., 2023). Nash and Browne (2021, p. 87), for instance, document what they term hetero-activist resistances in schools in Canada and the UK: They show that inclusion of, and support for, sexual orientation and gender identity learning resources “is actively contested.” In British Columbia, this takes the form of parents and candidates for school

boards organizing around the idea that sexual orientation and gender identity content is a trend of the day (MacDonald & Little, 2022) rather than a human rights issue. At the same time, rights have a significant impact on people’s everyday lives. Earle et al. (2021, p. 864) show from a survey of 77 countries that “living in an environment that legally supports LGBT communities is associated with more personal LGBT rights support,” even when people have no personal connection to members of queer or gender diverse communities.

At the City of Vancouver, the TGD2S strategy is understood as an equity-related Council directive, one of many that emerged prior to—and paved the way for—the adoption of the city-wide *Equity Framework* in 2021. The *Equity Framework* (City of Vancouver, 2021a, p. 8) also understands rights to be salient: Compliance with the law on human rights and safe workplaces is one of three “imperatives for action towards equity.” However, across the internally-facing staff memos and externally-facing reports to Council, supporting trans inclusion is also framed as setting the City in a leadership role and laying a path “that will be of great benefit” not only to TGD2S communities but to organizations, community agencies, and electeds at all levels of government (City of Vancouver, 2016, p. 3). This framing is suggestive of the broader policy impact the TGD2S strategy has had.

In the next section, I develop a theoretical framework using literature on equity and urban innovation in municipal governance to explore the question of whether or how an equity intervention can also serve as an innovation tool. Ultimately, I place this scholarship into conversation with a more in-depth look at the origins and outcomes of the TGD2S strategy to consider the significance of this strategy on policy within and beyond the scope of the City of Vancouver.

#### 4. Equity and/as Innovation

As Loh and Kim (2021) write, the issue of equity is central to the practice of planning. Although equity suffers from a lack of consistent definition (Cairney et al., 2022), it is typically understood as access in two directions: Access resulting from equitable distribution of resources and services on the one hand, and, on the other, procedural access that transforms the who and the how of decision-making. Joy and Vogel (2021) further describe these two directions of equity with an intersectional lens, underlining the multidimensional experience of social difference and oppression:

Equity ensures that human beings in all their intersecting personal, familial, sociopolitical, and geographic differences have access to the opportunities, resources, and supports they need to survive and thrive. Simultaneously, equity requires that we understand and address the ideational systems and socio-political practices that block access for particular groups. (Joy & Vogel, 2021, p. 1376)



Notably, equity is defined in relation to—and distinct from—equality. Whereas equality is recognized as sameness (all people have access to the same opportunities, for instance), equity is recognized as addressing systemic barriers that impede access to opportunities. The move from equality to equity in Canadian municipal frameworks is a trend that has occurred in the past twenty years; as such, strategies dating from the early 2000s often used the term equality (most often in relation to gender). It is important to note that equity frameworks (unlike equality, when used in law) are not legally binding.

Given that the distribution of public assets is a central feature of planning, attention to who has access to resources and services is critical, as are efforts to expand opportunities for those who have less access because of historical and contemporary forms of exclusion (Loh & Kim, 2021, p. 182). However, there is tension between equity, diversity, and democracy in both theory and practice, as Fainstein (2010) reminds us. To cite one example, creating opportunities for participatory governance does not by definition translate into greater participation for historically excluded communities (Fainstein, 2010; Flyvbjerg, 1998). This is demonstrably shown in the case studies co-created for Black urban placemaker Jay Pitter's graduate course: She and her co-authors reveal the myriad barriers that prevent Black and other historically marginalized communities from fully engaging in civic participation, despite any increase in the number of participation opportunities (see Pitter, 2021). Even as it is complicated to implement equity in planning practice (Brand, 2015; Loh et al., 2022), recent commitments to examining equity within and outside the planning profession in Canada (Canadian Institute of Planners, 2021; Federation of Canadian Municipalities [FCM], n.d.) demonstrate that there is ever more attention to the role that equity plays in planning.

As such, addressing equity has become part of a municipality's work in the Canadian context. In British Columbia, local governments are responsible, in part or in full, for providing land use decisions and other core services. However, all local governments in Canada operate under provincial legislation; in practice, this means that their decision-making power and capacity to raise money are constrained. Regardless, many municipal governments have taken leadership positions on files—like equity—that are not historically part of their core services mandate. Given that cities are the scale at which the disproportionate impacts of housing insecurity, violence, and employment precarity become most visible (Klodawsky et al., 2017, p. 4), local governments are increasingly asked to address a broader range of issues (Mévellec et al., 2020). In their exploration of innovation and inclusion within Canadian municipal governance, Bradford and Bramwell (2014) show that some cities have rejected the idea that provincial governments dictate their capacity to shape their own futures. In these cases, cities have taken on what they understand to be

an “enhanced policy role” whose process is “centred in, and responsive to, the local community” (Tindal & Tindal, 2009, p. 392, as cited in Bradford & Bramwell, 2014, p. 320).

Equity should thus be recognized as an essential feature of municipal responsiveness. The *Equity Framework* identifies three reasons for the timeliness of this intervention (City of Vancouver, 2021b): Justice (addressing historical and systematic oppression), compliance (conforming to provincial and federal human rights codes), and effectiveness (recognizing the workplace benefits of hiring, retaining, and promoting diverse staff). However, the question of the shape or implementation of equity and inclusion is discussed in the scholarly literature in critical terms. Scholars note the discrepancy between aspirational commitments and operationalized enactments of equity. Sustainability and resilience planning illustrates this problem; according to Loh and Kim (2021, p. 138), critiques of this field have shown how equity is mentioned but is not incorporated into actionable policy and planning. Andrew and Doloreux (2014, p. 138) also identify that social development initiatives like inclusion suffer when municipalities function with limited horizontal coordination across departments. This is echoed in Bain and Podmore's (2021) examination of the inclusion of sexuality and gender diversity in municipal governance. They argue: “Social issues are often siloed within the mandates of specific committees with limited intersectional crossover” (Bain & Podmore, 2021, p. 1660). Finally, the scholarship notes that where equity and inclusion are understood as exclusively social development initiatives, there is little integration between these strategies and other areas of city business, like economic development (Andrew & Doloreux, 2014), except when equity can be framed in terms of advancing economic goals (Loh & Kim, 2021).

Where equity goals *have* been advanced in local government, scholars identify divergent reasons for this outcome. Davis and Edge (2022, pp. 14–15) write that well-defined goals are key but the conjoined efforts of strategically-minded local activists and politicians are even more central. By contrast, Liao et al. (2019) find that equity is dependent on interdepartmental collaboration and an emphasis on procedural justice, like resident participation. Whitzman et al.'s (2014, p. 444) argument that “four legs for a good table” is essential for delivering improvements to women's safety brings these two views together in some ways: They argue that the four legs, or the combination of electeds, public servants, community group advocates, and (academic) researchers, is needed to create change that promotes equity and inclusion.

Could such advancements be considered innovative? Certainly, equity interventions developed through a process of co-design meet several criteria laid out by scholarship about innovation in the public sector. Defining innovation as an “intentional and proactive process that involves the generation and practical adoption and spread of new and creative ideas, which aim to produce

a qualitative change in a specific context,” Sørensen and Torfing (2011, p. 849) argue that networked collaboration with multiple stakeholders can enhance public innovation. These authors emphasize that innovation is not “business as usual” but with more efficiencies. Rather, innovation is second- or third-order change that upends routines or transforms the ways problems or policies are understood (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011, p. 850). Innovative urban governance as framed by McGuirk et al. (2022, p. 1392) is similarly interested in imagining a different set of practices, motivated by responsiveness and experimentation, and emphasizing “multi-sectoral co-design and collaboration.” Although there is not a consistent set of features associated with innovative urban governance, what is common across its multiple forms is a defiance of the rigid, hierarchical structure and anti-risk behaviour for which bureaucratic tradition is known (Criado et al., 2021) and an urge for collectively driven transformation (McGuirk et al., 2022, p. 1396).

Taking up the idea of collaboration in innovation, particularly in terms of policy co-design, Blomkamp (2018, p. 66) notes that problem definition—and solutions ideation—will be improved from the participation of a greater diversity of participants throughout the policymaking process. Here, improvement implies that a greater diversity of needs is met. This is an important consideration for valuing innovation: As Shearmur and Poirier (2017) argue, it is not just economic logic or market competition that drives innovation for local governments. Rather, municipalities support innovative ideas when they address goals like “solving practical problems associated with material aspects of municipal responsibility” (Shearmur & Poirier, 2017, p. 741). In this sense, collaboration on issues like equity initiatives could be understood as an innovative response to an emergent challenge.

Notably, participatory governance has already played an important role in guiding equity initiatives in Canadian municipalities. Ottawa’s City for All Women Initiative (CAWI), for instance, has worked since the early 2000s both inside and outside municipal government to shape the development and adoption of equity tools for municipal practitioners (Andrew & Doloreux, 2014; Siltanen et al., 2015). What is unique to CAWI is the way they conducted this work both within and outside City Hall: Their ability to maintain a link (an office or staff liaison) in City Hall while also retaining their community profile has meant that they have been able to draw in a far more diverse set of community members than those who would normally participate in community engagement exercises (Siltanen et al., 2015). Seen through the framework of innovation, this model of collaboration is hugely important. Without attracting diverse voices, collaboration will lead to stasis instead of innovation, particularly when collaborations occur “in closed and stable networks” and in forums where power dynamics are left unattended (Sørensen & Torfing, 2011, p. 853).

Sørensen and Torfing (2011, p. 853) go on to note that, with careful management, collaboration can be fun-

damental to innovation. Considerations for such management include recognition of community knowledge and expertise where, as an avenue for procedural democracy, community members are invited to redefine existing terms of engagement (Corburn, 2003). Co-design of equity interventions presents a significant opportunity for innovation, then, if those who have been historically excluded from planning and decision-making are invited into a meaningful collaborative process.

As Bain and Podmore (2021) show, the application of diversity and inclusion policies to LGBTQ2S communities is uneven in many Canadian municipalities. Their study reveals civic ambivalence toward including sexual and gender diversity in suburban municipal social inclusion efforts; this agrees with my own findings about a welcoming and inclusive city policy in a small city context (Muller Myrdahl, 2017). Yet, the current equity landscape seems to be shifting in several important ways, at least in British Columbia. For one, it is supported at multiple scales, so municipal policies are in conversation with the provincial and federal expectation to apply GBA+ (gender-based analysis plus) to all aspects of governance. Second, the current focus on equity is arguably more politically engaged than earlier iterations of either gender equality strategies or diversity and inclusion initiatives, which were heavily influenced by a mandate for multicultural (immigrant) recognition and integration. The language used in current iterations of equity is more overtly political, acknowledging, for example, the way structural inequality is foundational to North American urban development.

The fact that municipal equity efforts are no longer limited to a few select cities also sets current equity efforts apart, as does the fact that equity made it onto the 2022 agenda of municipal priorities set by the FCM, the organization that works at the federal scale on behalf of local governments. The 2022 agenda acknowledged inclusion as a long-held priority that was reaffirmed through the adoption of its anti-racism and equity commitment statement (FCM, 2022, n.d.). This statement commits the organization to rectify inequities by “grounding our culture, systems, policies and practices in an intersectional, anti-racism and equity lens” (FCM, n.d.). How this will become actionable remains to be seen, but it finally responds to a long-standing call by historically marginalized communities to take seriously the inequities built into urban form and process (Pitter, 2020).

Taken together, the scholarly and applied considerations of equity in Canadian municipalities, read alongside approaches to innovation in urban governance, provide a framework to analyze the TGD2S strategy. In the next section, I draw from the database of the Park Board and City documents to tell the story of its origins and give an overview of its outcomes. Then, I read the TGD2S strategy through this lens of equity and/as innovation to interpret the role and policy-related impacts of this intervention.

## 5. Origins and Outcomes of the TGD2S Strategy

Formal inclusion of TGD2S people in the governance of the City of Vancouver began with the introduction of the City's (then-titled) LGBTQ Advisory Committee in 2009 (Murray, 2015). As a volunteer-driven city advisory, the committee provides staff and council with input on issues relevant to City business. Under their terms of reference, advisory committees must develop an annual work plan with specific priorities, supported through the work of subcommittees. In the 2013 LGBTQ Advisory, the Trans and Gender Variant Inclusion Working Group (TGVIWG) was initiated (Murray, 2015, p. 60) to work with the Park Board on priority one of its newly-developed strategic framework: To create parks and recreation for all. In May 2013, the TGVIWG was constituted as a working group of the Park Board (Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, 2013).

Tasked with reporting back on barriers to access and recommended changes, the TGVIWG conducted an extensive, nearly year-long consultation process that included town hall meetings, surveys, focus groups, and other activities in two phases. First, they sought broad community engagement with TGD2S community members and allies, community centre frontline and aquatic staff, City Project Managers, recreation centre users, and community partners. Second, they refined their findings in a community review phase, seeking feedback from TGD2S community members and allies, frontline staff, and other City advisory groups (Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, 2014). Each phase involved contact with more than 200 people, many of whom shared intimate stories of challenges they, or their friends and loved ones, faced when using Park Board services and facilities. One story exemplifies the experiences collected: In it, a parent recounted how their gender creative child felt unwelcome and out of place at park programs. The parent wrote:

She chooses day camps, like any kid does, based on where she feels safe and welcome....If staff and children respect Kate's right to her gender expression and are interested in her as a multifaceted young person, it's a thumbs up. Unfortunately, a series of bad experiences have made her extremely wary of all-day camps. Today she is very clear she does not feel safe at community centre day camps. (Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, 2014, p. 27)

Kate's experiences sum up inaccessibility: At a city-run community centre, where programming should be comparatively low cost and available to all, some kids feel unsafe and that they don't belong. These encounters set the bar for what young people (and their parents) come to expect of municipal-led services.

The outcome of this participatory process was a sixty-four-page report presented to the Park Board in April 2014 (Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation,

2014). The report (abbreviated here to *Building a Path*) outlined seventy-seven recommendations aiming to improve access for TGD2S residents "to green spaces, active living, and community provided by the Park Board" (Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, 2014, p. 1). The recommendations were organized into six areas, each designated under one of the three directions of the Park Board's strategic framework. The six areas were: Public space and signage; programming; financial accessibility; community partnerships; forms and literature; and human resources and training. Recommendations included increasing the number of single-user change areas, piloting recreational programs specific to TGD2S residents, adjusting the gender category options on Park Board forms, and developing and implementing training materials and programs for staff at all levels.

This report was the foundation for a host of changes made through the Park Board, with City support: In other words, the City was implicated in making the necessary facilities modifications. While Council had already made Vancouver the first Canadian municipality to pass a municipal building code provision for gender-neutral washrooms in public buildings (in September 2013), the *Building a Path* report set the stage for an implementation strategy of signage, education, and services to make Vancouver parks and community centres more welcoming to TGD2S users. The most eye-catching part of this strategy, launched in March 2015, was an awareness campaign in the form of highly visible posters (approximately four feet tall) on display at community centres featuring pictures of, and statements by, TGD2S people (and in one case, a youth with their parents; Hallett, 2015; The Georgia Straight, 2015; "Vancouver Park Board launches," 2015). By September 2016, the TGVIWG had established a steering committee with Park Board staff, completed signage guidelines (using text and functional icons rather than gendered symbols for washrooms), revised pilot programming (moving to trans swim instead of trans inclusive public swim), and identified a list of priority next steps (including training and policies).

With the Park Board implementation in progress, Council passed the Supporting Trans\* Equality and an Inclusive Vancouver motion in 2015 and tasked staff with assessing how the TGVIWG recommendations could be brought into the scope of City services, facilities, and operations (TransFocus Consulting & Equity Labs in City of Vancouver, 2016, p. 3, Appendix A). The consultants who won the bid to develop the proposal had been involved in the TGVIWG and were thus intimately familiar with the existing asks and possible directions. Submitted to Council in July 2016, the TGD2S strategy laid out fourteen recommendations with thirty-one sub-recommendations, almost all of which built upon the existing work in the Park Board (and updates undertaken by the School Board). Like *Building a Path*, the TGD2S strategy was organized into thematic pillars: Public space, facilities + signage; programs + services; human resources; communications + data; and



community consultation + public partnerships. In addition to recommendations under each pillar, five quick starts—action items that could be completed within six to eighteen months—were identified, with attention to high impact and feasibility for financial and operational implementation (TransFocus Consulting & Equity Labs in City of Vancouver, 2016, p. 16, Appendix A). The subsequent changes were as substantive as the *Building a Path* implementation, but with a wider reach. Several of these changes and their policy impacts are discussed below.

## 6. Discussion

Through the review of documents, two elements are immediately noticeable. The first is the scope of change across the municipal government. The TGD2S strategy is neither siloed nor is it limited to social policy and programming. Rather, the strategy has been taken up across the organization. The most obvious example is washrooms. Starting from the focus on Park Board washrooms in the *Building a Path* recommendations, the TGD2S strategy fostered a complete overhaul of both signage and washroom access in City-owned or City-leased buildings. As of the 2019 update, this includes signage at twenty-seven community centres, nearly eighty field-house washrooms (in parks), and at least five civic administration buildings or City-leased properties where City staff work (City of Vancouver, 2019b, p. A-1).

Two other examples provide a clear sense of scope. Part of the human resources pillar, a staff and management training initiative identified that “over 1000 Engineering Services employees received training in 2018” (City of Vancouver, 2019b, p. 7). While the report’s emphasis was on the number of staff trained, it is equally remarkable to reflect on the content of the training: City-wide, staff are being educated about TGD2S lives and gender diversity, which historically is not typical of municipal staff training. A second illustration is data collection and reporting. The communications + data pillar included the recommendation to create and use data collection methods that include TGD2S people across all City departments, with sub-recommendations stipulating the need for (a) consistent policy and protocol for collecting gender data and (b) clear standards for conducting TGD2S-inclusive analysis and reporting. As both an internal and external practice that underpins a wide variety of City work, revising data collection practices is a significant undertaking that has important consequences for TGD2S visibility and inclusion (Doan, 2016). By 2019, the Park Board program registration system was updated to remove gender as a required category (City of Vancouver, 2019b, p. 8), and by 2020, considerable changes had been made to internal and external data-gathering practices. Specifically, following the creation of an inventory of internal forms that collect binary gender data, all City departments were engaged in an exercise to identify when and how data related to gender would be collected (City of Vancouver, 2020, p. 10).

As a bottom-up initiative that achieved this scope of change, I read this strategy as an equity-driven innovation: All of the outcomes represent operational transformation, where TGD2S communities have been explicitly incorporated across City structures. Compared to a model of ad hoc inclusion, where responsibility for the strategy lies with a staff champion (Bain & Podmore, 2020), by 2019, the strategy had been embedded into the work of affordable housing, engineering, and many other units because “departmental goals to achieve [TGD2S] inclusion [had] been identified for implementation” every year since the strategy’s adoption (City of Vancouver, 2019b, p. 5). Moreover, the successful scope of the intervention stems in part from the deliberate approach taken early on: The TGVIWG developed the *Building a Path* report in such a way that its findings and recommendations were clearly aligned with the directions of the Park Board’s strategic framework. This made for a clear business case in conjunction with the work the Park Board already sought to undertake.

The second element illuminated by this review is that the City-wide policy implications were accomplished through a volunteer-driven strategy that relied on the knowledge and expertise of TGD2S people. Starting with the TGVIWG report, TGD2S inclusion began from a volunteer TGVIWG-led consultation, which was a shift in procedural process at the City: In effect, the City supported the bottom-up initiative by providing meeting space and funding but enabled the TGVIWG to take the lead. This power-sharing move also meant a shift in the working interpretation of expertise. For the data collection process to be considered valid, the embodied expertise of TGVIWG and community members had to be assigned value. This approach to participatory governance is characteristic of an innovatory model that is based upon pluralized and dispersed authority (McGuirk et al., 2022).

Moreover, the path leading from the TGVIWG to the TGD2S strategy was, in practice, a process of co-design. Blomkamp (2018, p. 63, emphasis in original) notes that co-design requires that “people who are affected by the issue are *active participants* in the design process,” from the outset rather than simply involved in a consultation at a mid-way or endpoint. The relational exchange between the TGVIWG, the Park Board, and the City can be characterized this way, particularly once the organization elected to act on the expertise shared by community members. Once at the stage of strategy development, the consultants, who had been at the centre of the volunteer working group, also undertook a process of stakeholder consultation, but this time looking internally. The team met with fifty-seven participants across thirteen City departments plus City-affiliated organizations, as well as select advisory committees and external service providers who are familiar with the needs of the most vulnerable TGD2S community members. Bringing internal feedback to bear on expertise shared and lessons gleaned in the Park Board work, the

consultants extended the co-design practice into a strategy adopted by the council.

These three features in particular—its participatory-driven co-design, its wide-reaching policy-related impact, and the fact that its outcomes originated through a form of pluralized and dispersed authority—indicate that the TGD2S strategy can be interpreted as an equity-driven innovation. Yet, it is important to note that this interpretation does not align perfectly with theorizations of innovative urban governance. According to McGuirk et al. (2022, p. 1403), “innovatory practices explicitly seek less state-centred enactments of governance.” In the TGD2S case, the intention was not to extend authority beyond the confines of local government, even as authority was distributed through the practices of co-production. Indeed, the intention was to make government the locus of the equity work: The process was conceptualized within the context of municipal government, funded and supported by the municipal government, and the changes enacted are to government structures, whether physical infrastructure or data collection forms. Arguably, retaining a state-centred enactment of innovative governance is optimal because TGD2S human rights are at stake. For changes that involve bringing equity to the forefront, direction from an agreed-upon authority like the municipal government is important.

## 7. Conclusion: Equity as Innovation?

The TGD2S strategy levelled up equity and access for TGD2S community members, including City staff and resident/visitor users of programs and services. Several years following its approval by the council, it remains a visible component of the City of Vancouver’s equity profile. TGD2S-specific needs are apparent across various actions, like efforts to increase specialized homeless shelter capacity (City of Vancouver, 2019a). There is also a recognition that gender diversity is only one layer of a person’s identity, which is necessarily informed by their race, ability, and other identity categories. This is evident in the way that TGD2S needs are embedded across strategies: For instance, TGD2S people and experience are informing the safety priority of the Women’s Equity Strategy (City of Vancouver, 2022) and select Indigenous reconciliation efforts (City of Vancouver, 2020). Funding is being sought from the 2023 operating budget to update the 2016 strategy.

As this story also suggests, the impacts of the TGD2S strategy have been felt well beyond TGD2S communities. One example is the addition of universal washrooms in the City’s Building By-Law, which affects City-owned facilities as well as buildings not owned or operated by the City (City of Vancouver, 2019b). The 2019 By-Law updates require gender-neutral washrooms in all types of occupancies, from residential to industrial (City of Vancouver, 2019b, p. A-1). In 2013, when the By-Law was modified to require gender-neutral washrooms in public buildings, supporters noted the wider benefits of this change, espe-

cially for users who need assistance or care provision in the washroom. This was emphasized in the 2014 *Building a Path* report, which indicated that many recreation centres rely on universal spaces like the accessible single-stall or family washroom. In turn, the high demand for these few spaces “pits the needs of diverse users against one another” (Vancouver Board of Parks and Recreation, 2014, p. 17). With a change in By-Law and, as recommended by the TGD2S strategy, the sharing of these best practices with architects’ and engineers’ associations (City of Vancouver, 2019b), greater access to universal washrooms will be available more broadly. This is another form of equity as innovation: It is an example of how addressing the needs of the most marginalized improves services not just for one population in need, but for everyone.

The TGD2S strategy demonstrates that equity interventions can indeed drive innovation in municipal government. The need for similar interventions and innovations is widespread, especially for approaches that centre the expertise of those who feel less entitled to a seat at the planning table. The TGD2S strategy provides a useful starting point to offer lessons about the impact that pluralized authority and co-design can have. These processes can make visible communities that had been previously invisible to the City and ultimately reshape the City’s knowledge and practices. At the same time, they work to make cities safer and more inclusive for those whose voices and needs have never been factored into municipal planning.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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