

Municipal Engagement

Issue(s): *The City of Medicine Hat does not currently have a municipal public engagement strategy policy that defines an effective, efficient, consistent and transparent consultative process between the City of Medicine Hat's and its citizens and stakeholders.*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

To encourage effective and collaborative decision making that leaves both City representatives and stakeholders feeling considered and open to future engagement, the City of Medicine Hat should develop a public policy on municipal engagement that sets a minimum standard for stakeholder and community consultation, participation and involvement. This policy would include principles such as inclusive planning, transparency, authentic intent, broad, informed and accessible participation, appropriate processes, authentic use of information received and analysis, feedback and evaluation to the community. Once implemented, this engagement process should apply across all City departments, resulting in an easy to follow framework for the City to engage public opinion and expertise.

BACKGROUND

Public Engagement is a general term used for a broad range of methods through which members of the public can become more informed about and/or influence public decisions. In order to support effective public involvement in Medicine Hat, the City must be focused on how officials use public involvement practices to help inform residents and help guide the policy decisions and actions of our local government.

There are a number of different methods for public engagement including:

Public Information/Outreach: This kind of public engagement is characterized by one-way local government communication to residents and other members of the community to inform them about a public problem, issue or policy matter.

Public Consultation: This kind of public engagement generally includes instances where local officials ask for the individual views or recommendations of residents about public actions and decisions, and where there is generally little or no discussion to add additional knowledge and insight and promote an exchange of viewpoints. Examples could include typical public hearings and council or board comment periods, as well as resident surveys and polls.

Public Participation/Deliberation: This form of public engagement refers to those processes through which participants receive new information on the topic at hand and through discussion and deliberation jointly prioritize or agree on ideas and/or recommendations intended to inform the decisions of local officials. Examples could include community conversations that provide information on the budget and the budget process and ask participants to discuss community priorities, confront real trade-offs, and craft their collective recommendations or it could include the development of a representative group of residents who draw on community input and suggest elements and ideas for a general plan update.

Sustained Public Problem Solving: This form of public engagement typically takes place through the work of place-based committees or task forces, often with multi-sector membership, that over an extended period of time address public problems through collaborative planning, implementation, monitoring and/or assessment.

Why Engage the Public?

Engaging the public provides better identification of the public's values, ideas and recommendations. Good public engagement can also provide more nuanced and collective views about an issue by a broader spectrum of residents. This also provides a populace of residents who are more informed about issues and about the local municipal government. While most residents do not regularly follow local policy matters carefully, good public engagement can present opportunities for residents to better understand an issue and its impacts and to see municipal challenges as their challenges as well.

Additionally, engagement improves local decision-making and actions, with better impacts and outcomes because members of the public have information about their community's history and needs. They also have a sense of the kind of

place where they and their families want to live. They can add new voices and new ideas to enrich thinking and planning on topics that concern them. This kind of knowledge, integrated appropriately into local decision making, helps ensure that public decisions are optimal for the community and best fit current conditions and needs.

In turn, this type of process creates more community buy-in and support; with less contentiousness public engagement by residents and others can generate more support for the final decisions reached by the municipal decision makers. Put simply, participation helps generate ownership. Involved residents who have helped to shape a proposed policy, project or program will better understand the issue itself and the reasons for the decisions that are made. Good communications about the public's involvement in a local decision can increase the support of the broader community as well.

By engaging the public you have more civil discussions, reasoned conversations and problem solving, which creates more civil decision making. This in turn assists in more streamlined and expedient project implementation timelines with less of a need to revisit the issue or policy frequently. Buy-in and the potential for broad agreement on a decision, are important contributors to faster implementation and reduces the need for unnecessary decision-making "do-overs."

In the end good public engagements establishes greater trust in each other and in local government. People who work together on common problems usually have more appreciation of the problem and of each other. Many forms of public engagement provide opportunity to get behind peoples' statements and understand the reasons for what they think and say. This helps enhance understanding and respect among the participants. It also inspires confidence that problems can be solved – which promotes more cooperation over time. Whether called social capital, community building, civic pride or good citizenship, such experiences help build stronger communities.

Many Canadian municipalities have evaluated their own methods of community engagement. Based on their findings, these municipalities have developed procedures and identified the roles and responsibilities of those involved. These communities include, but are not limited to:

1. Calgary, AB
2. Fort McMurray, AB
3. Fort Saskatchewan, AB
4. Grande Prairie, AB
5. Saskatoon, SK
6. St. Albert, AB
7. Strathcona County, AB
8. Vancouver, BC
9. Victoria, BC
10. Waterloo, ON

ANALYSIS

The City of Medicine Hat has consulted with stakeholders (industry groups, not for profits, general public, etc.) on several different issues in the recent past. However, having participated as a stakeholder in many of these consultations, the Medicine Hat & District Chamber of Commerce has found the structure and implementation of these consultations were neither consistent nor efficient.

There have been some core challenges that have limited effective engagement including:

1. **Role Confusion:** Clarifying the roles & responsibilities of staff, Council and citizens in decision making, project/program design, service, etc.
2. **Prioritization:** Identifying areas where civic engagement is most needed.
3. **Resourcing:** Ensuring top priorities receive the necessary resources to be well addressed.
4. **Consistency & Coordination:** Clarifying how & when engagement efforts are undertaken; and coordinating efficiently across City departments.
5. **Customer Service & Communication:** Ensuring prompt response times and clarity of responses are provided
6. **Diversity:** Recognizing that the City is diverse in its interests, preferred input methods and understanding of City processes.

The Institute for Local Government published the 10 Principles of Local Government Public Engagement and would serve to guide trusted, high-quality and effective public engagement efforts that are sponsored, designed, convened, and/or facilitated by local officials. The Principles of Local Government Public Engagement includes the following ten elements:

1. **Inclusive Planning:** The planning and design of a public engagement process includes input from appropriate local officials as well as from members of intended participant communities.
2. **Transparency:** There is clarity and transparency about public engagement process sponsorship, purpose, design, and how decision makers will use the process results.
3. **Authentic Intent:** A primary purpose of the public engagement process is to generate public views and ideas to help shape local government action or policy, rather than persuade residents to accept a decision that has already been made.
4. **Breadth of Participation:** The public engagement process includes people and viewpoints that are broadly reflective of the municipality's population of affected residents.
5. **Informed Participation:** Participants in the public engagement process have information and/or access to expertise consistent with the work that sponsors and conveners ask them to do.
6. **Accessible Participation:** Public engagement processes are broadly accessible in terms of location, time, and language, and support the engagement of residents with disabilities.
7. **Appropriate Process:** The public engagement process utilizes one or more discussion formats that are responsive to the needs of identified participant groups, and encourages full, authentic, effective and equitable participation consistent with process purposes. This may include relationships with existing community forums.
8. **Authentic Use of Information Received:** The ideas, preferences, and/or recommendations contributed by the public are documented and seriously considered by decision makers.
9. **Feedback to Participants:** Local officials communicate ultimate decisions back to process participants and the broader public, with a description of how the public input was considered and used.
10. **Evaluation:** Sponsors and participants evaluate each public engagement process with the collected feedback and learning shared broadly and applied to future engagement efforts.

From our analysis and in addition to the points above, a successful consultation process should include:

1. Documentation of the goal for the consultation (ie: inform, consult or involve) and the promise made to stakeholders (how the City will achieve that goal);
2. Defines the roles & responsibilities of those involved;
3. Proactively identifies affected parties;
4. Reaches the targeted market using methods that foster effective engagement;
5. Provides decision makers with all necessary information prior to a decision being made;
6. Ensures affected Stakeholders are well informed of potential issues/changes that may affect them;

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Medicine Hat & District Chamber of Commerce recommends the City of Medicine Hat develop and adopt a consistent and transparent public engagement policy to ensure municipal decisions are made with all relevant data considered and in the best interests of stakeholders. This would include, but would not be limited to:

1. Inclusion of the 10 principles for local government public engagement
2. Creation of a budget for the resources required to maintain the policy and engage the public;
3. Creation of an interested stakeholder list to refer to as issues arise;
4. Creation and implementation of a Service Level Agreement (SLA) to ensure affected parties are being heard and responded to within a consistent and acceptable timeframe;
5. Defining and publicizing in each consultative circumstance;
 - a. The roles & responsibilities of those involved (ie: Manager(s) in charge, contact people, etc) prior to commencement;
 - b. Identification of the targeted segment of the population;
 - c. Identification of the methods of engagement and approximate timeline;
 - i. Explain the reason for the chosen methods
 - ii. Providing appropriate notice (minimum notice time)
 - iii. Schedule dates & times that meet the needs of the targeted groups;
 - d. Provision to the stakeholders of a summary of the issue and access to any relevant information.
6. Provision of documentation of key differences between current policies/bylaws and proposed documents.
7. Provision to stakeholders of a summary of the feedback received prior to the decision being made;
8. A summary of stakeholder input should be made public and the City should explain how that feedback was incorporated or why it was not.
9. Inclusion of multiple methods for consultation and engagement including;
 - a. Surveys: Both on-line and printed survey options.

- b. Social Media: Including Facebook, Twitter and You Tube.
- c. Website Feedback: Utilization of a website link where residents can send a question or voice a concern. Strathcona County also provides links to information about previous consultations/decisions.
- d. Open Houses: Open houses are used by many municipalities for various public engagement purposes.
- e. Letters/Correspondence: Letters to stakeholders can be utilized depending on the issue/situation.
- f. Information/Subscriptions: Utilization of a subscription option whereby interested parties can sign up to receive emails on particular subjects of interest or to follow an issue.
- g. Advertisements in newspaper
- h. Radio/Television advertisements

RESOURCES

1. <http://www.ca-ilg.org/public-engagement>
2. National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation's Core Principles for Public Engagement: www.thataway.org/pep.
3. International Association for Public Participation's Core Values for the Practice of Public Participation: www.iap2.org.

Date Drafted: November 4, 2013

Date Reviewed: November 12, 2013

Date Approved: November 20, 2013