



STAFF REPORT TO FINANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

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DATE: November 14, 2023

TO: STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND AUDIT

NAME AND TITLE: Walter Babicz, City Manager

SUBJECT: Budget 2024 Community Engagement Results

ATTACHMENT(S): Citizen Budget 2024 Consultation Report – November 2023

RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Standing Committee on Finance and Audit RECEIVES FOR INFORMATION the report dated November 14, 2023, from the City Manager, titled “Budget 2024 Community Engagement Results.”

PURPOSE:

This report is provided for information in relation to the 2024 municipal budget.

BACKGROUND:

Budgets are one of the most difficult topics to engage the community on. While people often have opinions on how much their property taxes are, they sometimes find it to be much more difficult to provide thoughtful feedback on each of the service areas. The sheer size and complexity of a municipal budget can be intimidating.

When we ask citizens their opinions on service areas within the municipal budget we also have to consider the context. If we ask the average citizen how important corporate services is to them, they may not hold it in high esteem, but they may also not understand what it is. Things like mandatory compliance with legislation, risk, and procurement are very important to the operation of a municipality but won't rank as high as roads or parks in the everyday life of a citizen.

Bylaw services is also a difficult area to properly assess. A recent parking ticket may make a respondent value bylaw services much lower than someone who complained to have a car towed that was preventing snow clearing on their street.

The annual citizen engagement around the municipal budget is a crucial part of governance but we must also strive to achieve a culture of informing and listening to our community throughout the year. And we must continue to keep them informed of the services that are provided to them.

Budget consultation opportunities were hosted on the City's website, and shared broadly through news releases, social media, newsletters, and advertising. The City's budget webpage had 2,457

views. Of those views 1,196 came from Facebook, 709 from the Prince George Citizen, 248 from Google, 236 were direct to the website, and 68 from X.

Consultation this year was done through digital channels:

- Five satisfaction surveys
- The annual citizen budget survey
- Gathering comments received on social media

Budget engagement for 2024 also included three public open house events to provide information and gather feedback and questions on municipal services.

Social media

There were 24 social media posts on our social platforms with nearly 200 comments. The theme of the comments on these posts was around discretionary spending, lowering taxes, capital projects, homelessness, and protecting green space.

Citizen Satisfaction Surveys

Five satisfaction surveys focused on important City services. The goal was to understand how residents think the City is doing at providing the following services and receive their suggestions on improvements:

- Roads and sidewalks
- Parks and trails
- Events and recreation
- Snow and ice control
- Protective services

Total responses from all surveys: 1350.

One question on each survey asked respondents to indicate which garbage zone they live in to determine if we were reaching all neighbourhoods. There was close to equal representation across all zones in all surveys.

All the survey responses have been provided to City directors and managers for their information.

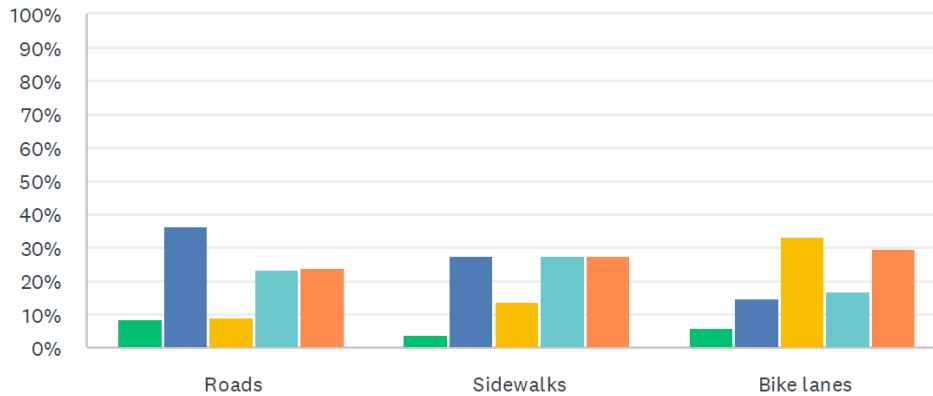
Roads and sidewalks

Total responses: 255.

Each of the questions in this survey allowed respondents to expand on their response in a comment. There were 599 comments indicating a very high level of interest and thought on this topic.

How satisfied are you with the quality of roads, sidewalks, and bike lanes in Prince George?

Answered: 255 Skipped: 0



Answer options:

- Green – they're great
- Dark blue – they're good enough
- Yellow – I'm indifferent
- Light blue – they're not good
- Orange – they need work

Roads: 44% of respondents thought they were great or good enough while 47% thought they are not good enough or need work.

Sidewalks: 31% of respondents thought they were great or good enough while 55% thought they are not good enough or need work.

Bike Lanes: 20% of respondents thought they were great or good enough while 46% thought they are not good enough or need work. 33% were indifferent.

In the comments residents had an opportunity to provide more detail around their responses to the questions. They commented on the high need for road replacement, the lack of accessible dips in sidewalks, uneven sidewalk surfaces, the need for more sidewalks, a need for traffic calming and lighting in some areas, and the lack of line paint in the spring. Several responses also expressed a need for more bike lanes and more safety measures for existing bike lanes. Concerns about bike lanes and sidewalks were the concerns noted the most.

Citizens were also asked from a list of priorities where the City should be focusing its efforts with respect to roads. Most respondents (70%) said repaving damaged roads. 59% said filling potholes faster. In the comments people again expressed a need for more sidewalks. Popular responses also included better visibility for bike lanes (signage, line painting) and more frequent line painting (though some commenters also expressed a desire to remove bike lanes).

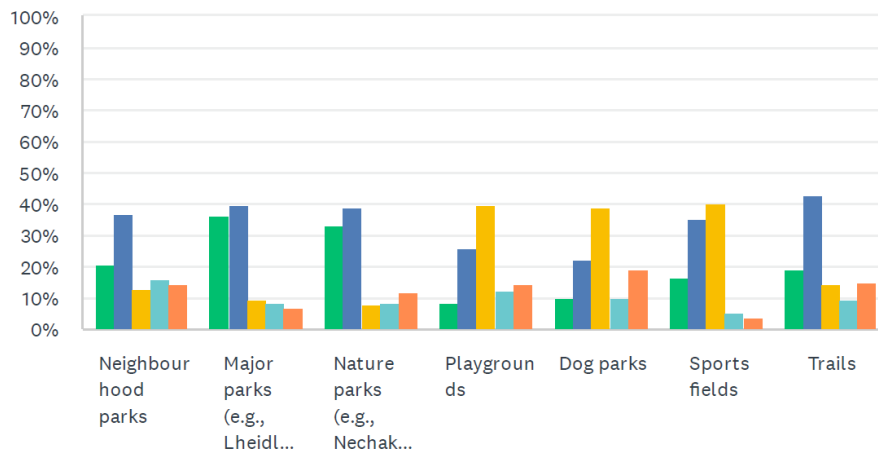
Finally, citizens were also asked from a list of priorities where the City should be focusing its efforts with respect to sidewalks. Replacing cracked and damaged sidewalks received the highest number of responses (65%) while adding sidewalks in areas that don't have them came in second (58%). Most comments expressed a need to resurface many of the uneven sidewalks, making them wider and improving or adding more curb ramps.

Parks and trails

Total responses: 251

Q2 Prince George has 106 kilometres of trails and 103 parks within city limits. How satisfied are you with the quality of parks and trails in Prince George?

Answered: 251 Skipped: 0



Answer options:

- Green – they're great
- Dark blue – they're good enough
- Yellow – I'm indifferent
- Light blue – they're not good
- Orange – they need work

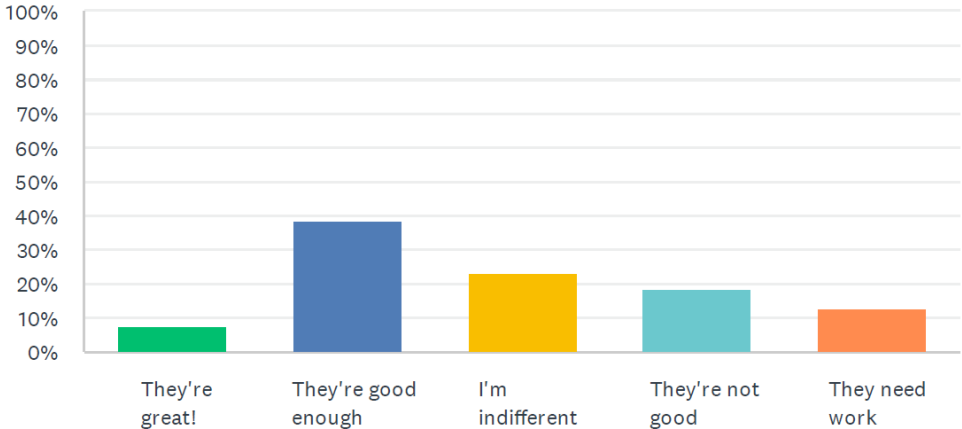
There were 566 comments on this survey. Common themes among the comments include a need to connect neighbourhoods to City and regional trail systems, a need for more (and larger) dog parks, and improvements to playground equipment.

Events and recreation

Total responses: 313

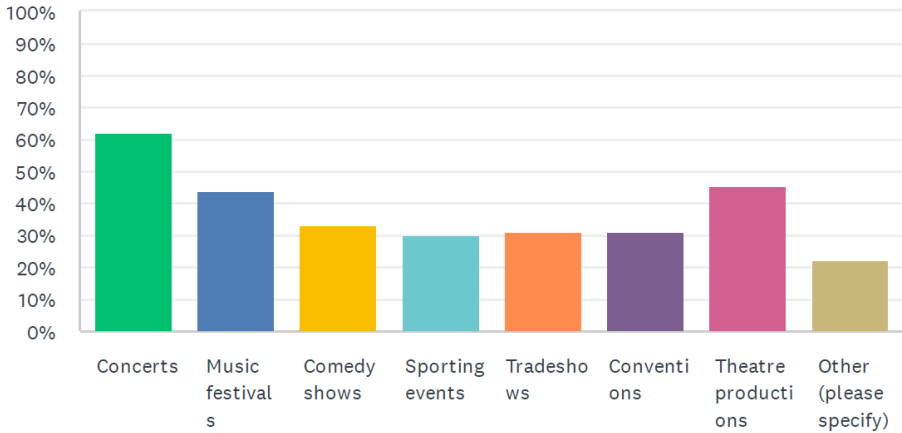
How satisfied are you with the quality of recreation opportunities in Prince George?

Answered: 313 Skipped: 0



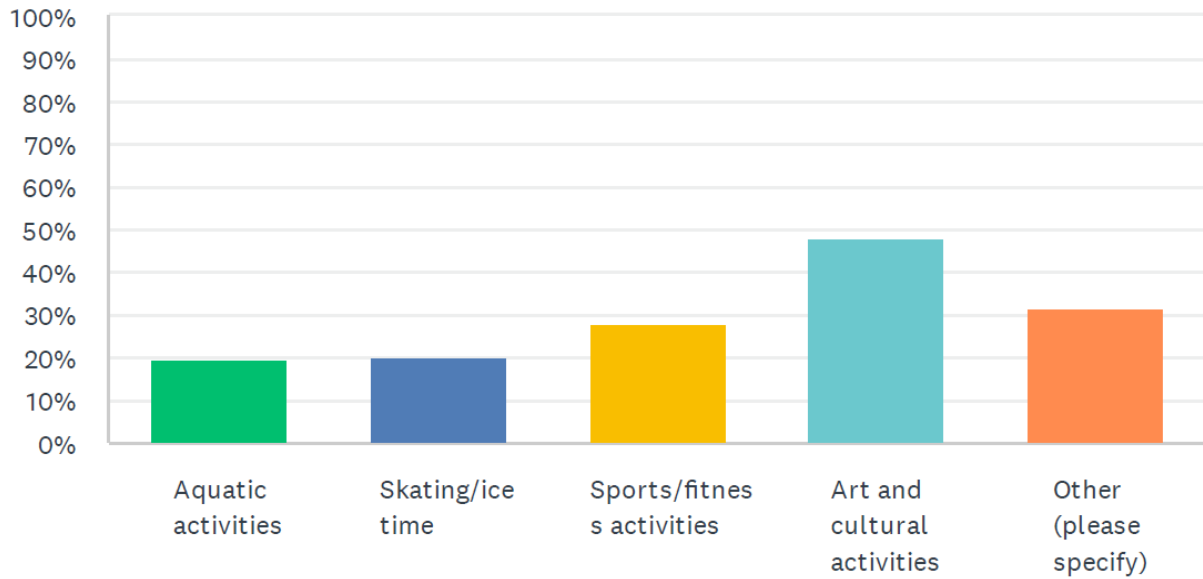
What does Prince George need more of? Check as many as you like.

Answered: 313 Skipped: 0



Q3 What does Prince George need more of?

Answered: 313 Skipped: 0



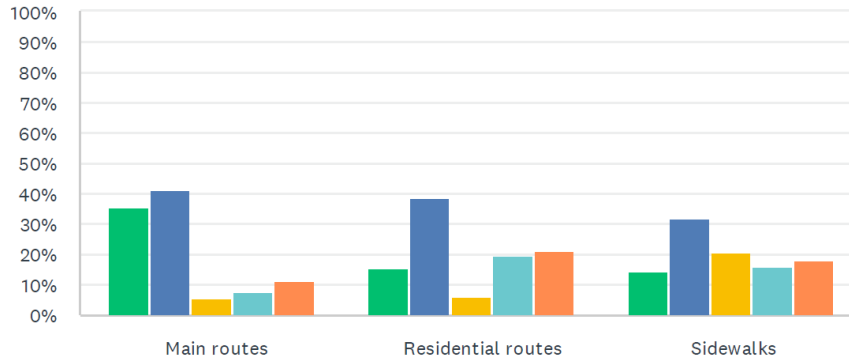
There were 482 comments on this survey. Many of the comments regarding facilities indicated a need for indoor activities for all ages through the winter. The comments around events indicate a desire for more family-friendly free outdoor events.

Snow and ice control

Total responses: 251

Q2 The City aims to clear main roads and sidewalks (priority one and two routes) within two days of a snow or ice event (i.e., if at least 7.5 cm of snow falls within 24 hours). The City aims to clear residential roads and sidewalks (priority three routes) within three days after all main roads are cleared. How satisfied are you with the quality of snow and ice management on our main routes, residential roads, and sidewalks?

Answered: 251 Skipped: 0



Answer options:

- Green – they're great
- Dark blue – they're good enough
- Yellow – I'm indifferent
- Light blue – they're not good
- Orange – they need work

Satisfaction on main routes = 77% great or good enough and 19% not good or needs work. 5% were indifferent.

Satisfaction with residential routes = 54% great or good enough and 40% not good or needs work. 6% were indifferent.

Sidewalks = 46% great or good enough and 24% not good or needs work. 21% were indifferent.

There were 251 comments on this survey. The comments were equally split between disappointed at the time it takes before residential roads are cleared and kudos for clearing roads so quickly. There were also many comments encouraging the City to ticket and tow illegally parked vehicles more promptly.

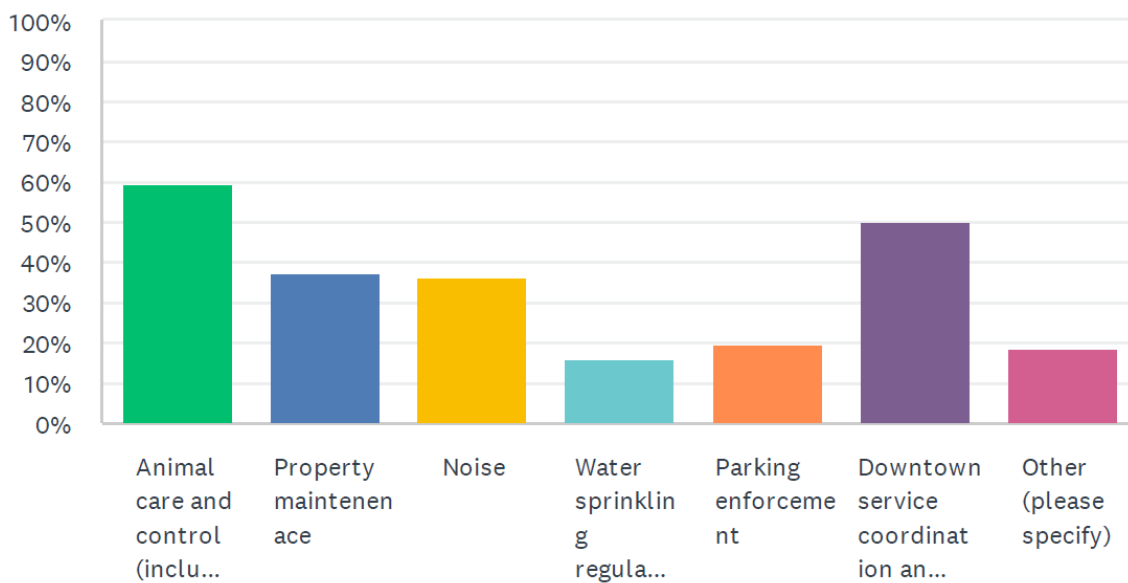
Protective services

Total responses: 280

This survey asked respondents to rate the level of service they have experienced from Fire and Rescue Services, the RCMP and Bylaw.

- 24% of respondents said they have needed the fire department. They rated their service 4.2 out of 5. Most comments were mainly regarding the fast response time and their professional and caring attitudes.
- 62% of respondents said they have needed the RCMP. They rated their service 3.75 out of 5. The majority of comments varied between pleased by the response time and professionalism and frustration over issues beyond police control.
- 36% of respondents said they have needed bylaw services. They rated their service 2.8 out of 5. Comments regarding interactions with Bylaw Services staff were positive however, there was some frustration expressed about some of the downtown social issues.

In addition to general satisfaction questions, respondents were asked which Bylaw services they value the most.



Citizen Budget Survey

This survey is on the Ethelo Citizen Budget platform. The survey questions this year were the same as previous years to allow for year-to-year comparisons. The survey ran from October 3rd to October 31st.

Participants were asked to increase, decrease, or maintain their property tax funding for different budget categories within a balanced budget or by increasing taxes. They were also asked to indicate on a sliding scale how important or unimportant different city services are for them. For each of the service areas a brief description of the service and a link to the City webpage was provided.

The survey platform had 1,500 visitors and verified 620 participants, and 327 comments.

The 620 validated participants collectively indicated their desire to keep budgets the same in 8 of the 13 budget areas. Year over year the responses in this area have varied very little. This year is an

anomaly with several service areas varying significantly from past years. The service areas with a majority of respondents indicating a desired budget change were as follows:

- Bylaw Enforcement Services: 15% Decrease. In 2023 and 2022 there was no change in this area.
- Community Planning and Economic Development: 15% Decrease. This area was called Community Planning and Infrastructure in 2023 and a 5% increase was recommended and no change was recommended in 2022.
- Corporate Services: 5% Decrease. This is consistent with past years.
- Police Services: 5% Increase. This is consistent with past years.
- Infrastructure Management: 5% Increase. This was not measured in 2023.

In 2023 a 5% increase was recommended in Snow and Ice Control and Roads and Sidewalks. For 2024 no change was the average recommendation.

Road, sidewalks, and storm drainage are seen as the top 3 budget priorities.

The following summarizes the feedback received for each service area:

Budget	Funding	Consensus	Support	Approval	Conflict
Police Services	5% Increase	64%	64%	63%	36%
Fire Protection Services	Keep the Same	81%	79%	77%	27%
Bylaw Enforcement Services	15% Decrease	36%	34%	20%	47%
Snow and Ice Control	Keep the Same	79%	77%	75%	26%
Roads and Sidewalks	Keep the Same	80%	77%	76%	25%
Public Transit Services	Keep the Same	73%	72%	67%	31%
Recreation and Community Services	Keep the Same	77%	75%	73%	27%
Parks, Trails, and Beautification	Keep the same	74%	72%	69%	31%
Community Support services	Keep the Same	67%	67%	58%	34%
Community Planning and Economic Development	15% Decrease	68%	64%	66%	25%
Infrastructure Management	5% Increase	76%	73%	74%	25%
Storm Drainage	Keep the Same	87%	84%	87%	21%
Corporate Services	5% Decrease	80%	74%	69%	16%
	Keep the Same	83%	69%	95%	4%

Approval is the percentage of people who gave a positive vote rather than a neutral or negative vote. Approval above 50% is a traditional “majority”.

Support is the average value of the votes, where the value of a totally opposing vote is 0 and a totally supportive vote is 100.

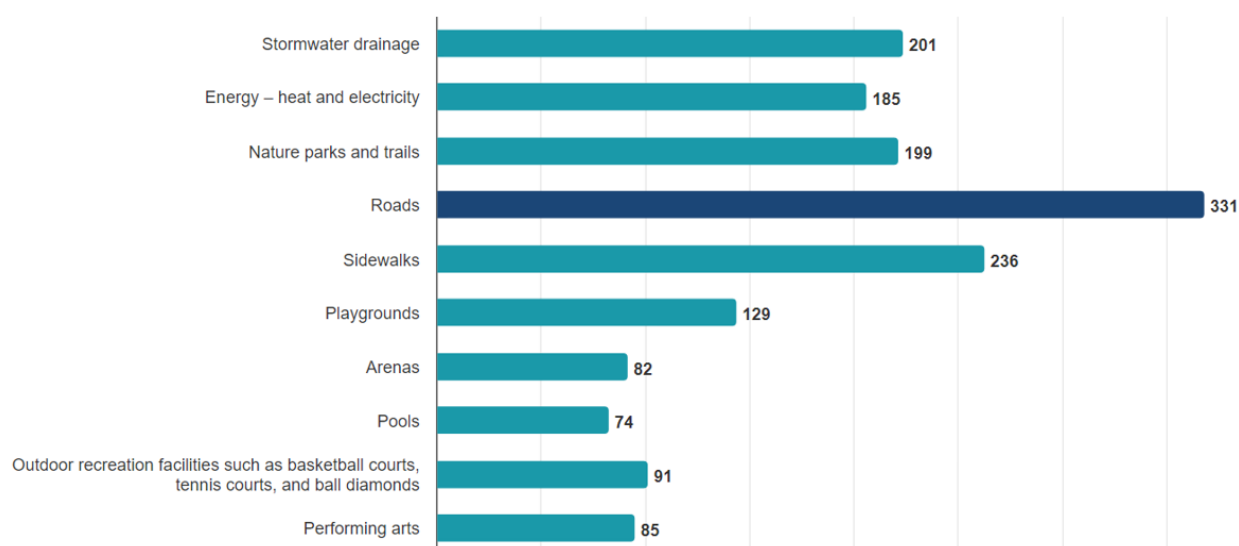
Consensus (Ethelo score) is a measure of the overall strength of the decision, considering both support (higher is better) and conflict (lower is better).

Conflict is a measure of the level of disagreement in a group and can be considered as the inverse of variance. Higher conflict scores represent internal resistance and risk of failure.

The level of satisfaction of the service areas varied:

1. Police services 4.7
2. Fire protection services 7.2
3. Bylaw enforcement services 3.7
4. Snow and Ice control 6
5. Roads and sidewalks 5
6. Public Transit services 4.4
7. Recreation and community services 5.3
8. Parks, Trails and beautification 5.2
9. Community support services 4.7
10. Community Planning an Economic Development 3.3
11. Infrastructure management 3.3
12. Corporate services 3.8

Infrastructure investment votes were cast as follows (450 participants):



The survey comments can be summarized into 10 areas of concern:

1. Infrastructure and Maintenance:
 - Concerns about the condition of sidewalks, roads, trails, parks, and green spaces.
 - Calls for efficient planning and addressing the needs of a growing population.
 - Concerns about snow removal efficiency and calls for improved services.
2. Financial Transparency:
 - Requests for transparency in project budgeting to avoid overruns.

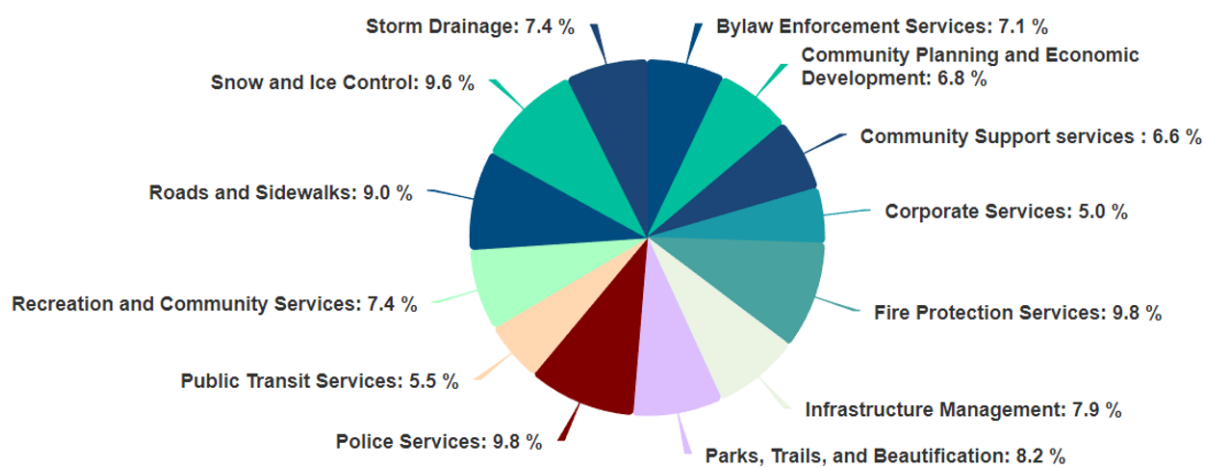
- Concerns about cost-effectiveness and the need for better financial management.
3. Housing, Homelessness, and Community Well-Being:
 - Emphasis on addressing housing affordability and homelessness.
 - Calls for support services, trauma-informed care, and root-cause solutions.
 - Advocacy for mental health services and addiction support.
 - Calls for initiatives to support vulnerable populations, including Indigenous youth.
 4. Public Safety and Policing:
 - Prioritization of public safety, especially in downtown areas.
 - Calls for increased police presence and measures to address crime.
 5. Economic Development and Downtown Revitalization
 - Calls for economic growth, attracting businesses, and downtown revitalization.
 - Concerns about the impact of homelessness on local businesses.
 6. Taxation and Fiscal Responsibility:
 - Calls for lower taxes and more efficient use of taxpayer money.
 - Concerns about the allocation of funds to projects with ongoing maintenance costs.
 - Calls for reevaluation of major developments based on current economic conditions.
 7. Community Services and Amenities:
 - Requests for more recreational opportunities, especially during winter.
 - Calls for better public transit, walkability, and investment in downtown amenities.
 8. Civic Engagement and Accountability:
 - Calls for more public input in decision-making processes.
 - Concerns about the perceived lack of accountability and transparency in city governance.
 9. Environmental Conservation:
 - Emphasis on protecting green spaces and wildlife corridors.
 - Calls for responsible development and consideration of environmental impact.
 - Calls for better management of garbage to prevent bear attractants.

10. Efficient City Operations:

- Calls for streamlined city operations and reduction of bureaucracy.
- Suggestions to sell or offload unnecessary city-owned properties.

Participants were asked to rate the importance of each of the funding areas:

The relative importance of each of the funding areas is shown below. It can be seen that Fire Protection and Police Services were seen as having the most importance. However, each of the thirteen funding areas were no more than +/- 2.7 percentage points from an average weighting of 7.7%.



Community Town Halls

Three townhall meetings were held from 5pm to 7pm on October 24, 25, and 26. One in the Hart, one in College Heights, and one downtown.

The events were led by the City Manager and City directors who provided a brief overview of municipal services and related tax implications. They then answered questions from the public for the remainder of the meeting. There was also a Service Centre staff person in attendance to record service requests, and communications staff to assist with event coordination.

Hart: This event was attended by approximately 25 citizens and 12 staff.

College Heights: This event was attended by approximately 7 citizens and 9 staff.

Downtown: This event was attended by approximately 14 citizens and 9 staff.

Comments and questions were regarding streetlights (more and less were both requested), road conditions, snow removal, homelessness, trails, garbage services, curbside compost and kitchen waste services, and bike lanes.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

This community engagement project directly impacts the ability of staff and council to address all of Council's strategic goals as the feedback from our citizens directly impacts budget and priorities for the coming year.

Specifically, the community engagement is also in line with the strategic goal: City government and infrastructure priorities. The second point under this goal is "Focus on meaningful communication and relationship development to advance shared priorities."

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

Promotion:

Medium	Ads	Impressions	Cost
Radio	60 ads on 2 stations	Uk	\$1,134
Newspaper	1 print ad	17,500 printed	\$530
Chamber of Commerce newsletter	1 digital ad	717 impressions 19 link clicks	\$100
Super Citizens e-news	2 emails	235 impressions 21 link clicks	0
Facebook boosted	2 boosted posts	68,000	\$106
Facebook post	10 posts	10,979	0
Instagram post	6 posts	9,991	0
X post	6 posts	2,173	0

The total campaign reach on Facebook was 30,471 as of October 31, 2023.

Town hall expenses

Item	Cost
Room rentals: Pioneer Hall, Civic Centre, College Heights Highschool	\$835
Audio visual rentals	\$5,400

The total cost of public engagement initiatives (not including staff time) is \$8,105.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

One of the most important parts of community engagement is reporting back to citizens. The communications division will inform the community of what we heard from them and how that information will be used in the decision-making.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

Walter Babicz, City Manager

PREPARED BY: Julie Rogers, Communications Manager

Meeting Date: 2023/12/04