

Date: September 23, 2024

To: **Mayor and Council.**

Name and title: Eric Depenau, Director of Administrative Services

Subject: Bi-annual town hall proposal

Attachment(s): None

## Recommendation(s):

That Council APPROVE the following three staff recommendations in the report titled, “Bi-annual town hall proposal” from the Director of Administrative Services dated September 23, 2024:

1. That the town hall or open house style event held each fall as part of the budget engagement process be considered to meet one of the two engagements requested by the July 22, 2024, Council resolution.
2. That each spring a public in-person session be held with the topic and format of the event to be determined by staff depending on the issue or project of significance at that time.
3. That the communications division budget be increased by \$25,000 to allow for the appropriate funding for any of the engagement options.

## Purpose:

To provide Council with a proposal to host two public engagement in-person sessions per year.

## Background:

At the Regular meeting of Council on July 22<sup>nd</sup>, the following motion was passed:

*That Council DIRECTS Administration to develop a plan for bi-annual Town Hall events to take place to be led by Council on major topics/issues within the community, in a bid to improve two-way communication and hear feedback from residents, and that staff will bring back a report to Council outlining this plan for consideration and approval by end of October 2024*

The Council Communications policy addresses public participation in section 4:

*The City of Prince George is committed to involving its citizens as part of decision-making processes. When the City gathers feedback from the community, the community will always be informed of how the information will be used and the results of the public engagement will be made public.*

*The City will use the following International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Core Values as its foundation when considering public participation and engagement:*

*4.1 Public participation is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.*

*4.2 Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.*

*4.3 Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.*

*4.4 Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.*

*4.5 Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.*

*4.6 Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.*

*4.7 Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.*

While the City does not have any dedicated public participation or community engagement staff positions, communications staff do use a Public Participation Toolkit to assist in guiding those processes. The general rule staff adhere to is that if the City is stopping, starting, or changing a service it is likely there should be some community engagement.

The Guiding Principles noted in this Toolkit are:

**1. Authenticity**

*In advance of the decision, the decision-maker clearly communicates any commitments.*

**2. Inclusion**

*The decision-maker will make every reasonable effort to include all stakeholders in the public participation process. Through inclusive planning, the City will ensure that the design, organization, and process serve both a clearly defined purpose and the needs of the participants.*

**3. Openness and learning**

*The City will help all involved listen to each other, explore ideas unconstrained by predetermined outcomes, and learn and apply information in ways that generate new options.*

#### **4. Commitment and accountability**

*The decision-maker demonstrates that results and outcomes are consistent with the commitments.*

#### **5. Transparency and trust**

*The City will be clear and open about the process and the level of impact the participants will have on the outcome. The City will provide a public record of the organizers, sponsors, outcomes, and range of views and ideas expressed and demonstrate how the outcomes were used in decision making.*

#### **6. Impact and action**

*Adequate time will be allocated to engagement activities to ensure a level playing field of understanding exists to ground dialogue and decision making. The City commits to ensure contributions of all participants are heard.*

#### **7. Culture of participation**

*The City will promote a culture of participation with programs and institutions that support ongoing quality public engagement.*

Through public engagement, the City can:

- allow community members and decision-makers to hear a variety of perspectives;
- manage differences, establish direction for moving forward on complex issues, and build understanding regarding trade-offs;
- foster confidence and trust in local government;
- build better neighbourhoods and stronger communities through common understanding and shared aspirations; and
- correct misinformation and address hidden obstacles or unknown consequences early in the process.

Respecting the City's Core Values and Guiding Principles in Public Participation, a specific plan to host town hall style meetings without having a specific topic to address is not recommended. The intent of the Council motion to provide such important opportunities for residents to participate in the decision-making process is invaluable and in general terms staff can plan for that.

For many years the City hosted a town hall style event for residents to learn and provide feedback on the City's annual budget. That event will continue and achieves one of the annual town hall events Council has requested.

Staff propose that each spring a second in-person event could be held but the format may change depending on the topic(s) to be addressed. An event might be a town hall style and include a simple presentation and Q&A session on a specific project or issue. However, the flexibility to plan an event that is most appropriate for the issue being addressed would be more in line with our core values. For example, the event might be more of a World Café style with brainstorming sessions in smaller groups. The City might also utilize booths, surveys, dot-matrix voting, games, mapping, graffiti, or a series of smaller meetings to gather feedback. Staff would appreciate the discretion to plan a public session (or more) that is most suitable for gathering feedback on the issues of importance to the City

or the community each spring. It is also important to note that at times there may not be one single “topic” for the event (e.g. public safety) and instead it could be broad, with an opportunity for residents to come and learn and provide feedback on various topics. It is not uncommon for more than one engagement to be open at the same time (parks enhancements, OCP, Civic Core and so on). Staff requests the Spring engagement event/town hall remain flexible in both format and topic(s).

As with all public activities offered by the City, members of Council will be invited to attend. The motion states that the two public events should be led by Council. Further consultation between staff and council is required to understand the best way for these events to be organized and facilitated.

### **Financial considerations**

Using the costs from recent public participation events as a guide, the following are the financial considerations. Depending on the topic of the public event, not all these costs may apply.

Advertising	\$4,000
Printing	\$2,000
Graphic design	\$1,500
Staff overtime	\$1,500
Audio visual	\$5,000
Live Stream	\$1,500
Facilitator	\$7,000
Venue	\$2,000
Refreshments	\$1,000
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$25,500</b>

### **Staffing**

A 2012 Communications Audit identified a need for at least two more staff. A lack of staff resources and funding for consultants are factors in this gap. An enhancement proposal related to the positions identified in 2012 has been submitted to the 2025 budgeting process for Council’s consideration.

### **Strategic Priorities:**

Council values of inclusivity, accountability, and transparency are respected in the expansion of community engagement opportunities.

The council objective to “continue to improve processes and practices to support effective and efficient service delivery” is aided by regular feedback and genuine consideration of the community’s ideas, concerns, and solutions.

### **Summary and conclusion:**

Council requested two town hall meetings per year and staff propose one town hall or open house per year at budget time and one in-person session each spring with the format to be determined depending on the issue being addressed.

Respectfully submitted:

Eric Depenau, Director of Administrative Services

Prepared by Julie Rogers, communications manager

Approved:

Walter Babicz, City Manager

Meeting date: 2024/10/21