

STAFF REPORT TO FINANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

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DATE: November 21, 2024

TO: STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND AUDIT

NAME AND TITLE: Eric Depenau, Director of Administrative Services

SUBJECT: Budget 2025 Community Engagement Results

ATTACHMENT(S):

1. Satisfaction survey results
2. Citizen Budget survey results

RECOMMENDATION(S):

THAT the Standing Committee on Finance and Audit RECEIVES FOR INFORMATION the report dated November 21, 2024, from the Director of Administrative Services, titled “Budget 2025 Community Engagement Results.”

PURPOSE:

This report is provided for information in relation to the 2025 municipal budget.

BACKGROUND:

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

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

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 3,672 views. Of those views 1,179 came from Facebook, with the rest coming from other social media, newsletters, local media links and direct searches.

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 2025 also included a public open house to provide information and answer questions on municipal services.

Social media

There were 31 social media posts on our social platforms with nearly 172,010 impressions and a total reach of 70,805. There were over 200 comments with the general themes including:

- Snow Removal and Winter Maintenance: Mixed feedback on snow clearing; some praise efforts like driveway clearing, while others highlight a perception of inadequate service in some areas
- Roads and Infrastructure: Concerns over poor road conditions, lack of sidewalks, and insufficient lighting. Calls for expanded roads and traffic improvements.
- Downtown and Beautification: Dissatisfaction with downtown due to homelessness, crime, and limited beautification efforts.
- Homelessness and Safety: Concerns about homelessness, with requests for mental health and addiction treatment centers.
- Public Services and Taxes: Complaints about high taxes and calls for better spending on infrastructure. There are widespread calls for the city to prioritize essential infrastructure (like stormwater and sewage) over new expenses, such as hiring for bear management or creating new park projects, which are seen as nonessential or excessive. Follow a structured budget, avoid debt, and eliminate unnecessary costs.
- City Growth and Development: Infrastructure isn't keeping up with new developments, especially in College Heights.
- Recreational Facilities: Suggestions for more recreational spaces and upgrades to parks, washrooms, and playgrounds.
- Public Transportation: Requests for improved bus service, including routes to the airport
- Safety and Accessibility: Concerns about safety, especially for seniors and pedestrians, due to poor lighting and infrastructure.
- General Praise: Some positive feedback on roadwork, snow clearing, and city services overall.
- Generate City Revenue: Utilize land and partnerships (e.g., with BC Hydro) to increase revenue.
- Downtown Revitalization: Allocate budget to revitalize downtown, support businesses, and address homelessness.
- Government Accountability: Improve transparency, cut waste, and boost efficiency in city operations.
- Infrastructure Focus: Prioritize essential repairs (water, sewer) over arts and museums.
- Support for Seniors: Develop a senior village with housing and medical support.
- Mistrust of Leadership: Concerns over leadership being unresponsive and self-serving.
- Encourage Community Involvement: Promote constructive involvement over complaints.

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 for improvements. The surveys were available from October 7th to November 8th. There are a total of

941 responses to these surveys.

In previous years paper copies of the surveys were available at City Hall. After reviewing feedback on past surveys and social media comments, this year paper copies were also made available at two library branches, two seniors' centres and at the public open house. A total of 277 paper surveys were submitted and manually entered by communications staff.

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.

The following are the topic areas covered:

- Protective services – 235 responses
 - General satisfaction expressed for fire, police and bylaw services. Areas of concern include staffing/resources, firefighters responding to non-fire emergencies, downtown safety and cleanliness, homelessness, and bylaw being complaint based rather than proactive.
 - The most important bylaw services noted were animal control and property maintenance.
- Roads and sidewalks – 161 responses
 - Generally, residents are satisfied with the highest satisfaction with roads, followed by sidewalks and the least satisfied area is bike lanes. Areas of concern are accessibility issues with sidewalks, road conditions, and unsafe bike lanes (including parked cars in bike lanes).
 - The road issues the City should be focused on are filling potholes faster and repaving damaged roads.
 - The sidewalk issues the City should be focused on are adding sidewalks and replacing sidewalks.
- Events and recreation – 161 responses
 - Residents are generally satisfied with recreation opportunities, but they would like more art and cultural activities and more sports and fitness activities. They also have a long list of suggestions in their comments.
 - Residents are generally satisfied with the events at civic facilities, and they would like more concerts, festivals, and theatre productions.
- Parks and trails – 173 responses
 - Respondents are generally satisfied with all areas of parks and trails with the least satisfaction with dog parks and playgrounds. Concerns include accessible trails, and a lack of dog parks, park maintenance, and trail connectivity.
- Snow and ice control – 211 responses
 - Satisfaction is highest with main roads followed by residential roads. The least satisfied category is sidewalks, but it is still satisfied or indifferent by more than 50% of respondents.
 - Concerns include windrows at the end of driveways and a belief that our clearing service should continue. It was also noted several times that the residential areas

around Hart Highway feel underserved during heavy snowfalls. Calls for increased attention to secondary streets, bus routes, and school areas were common.

Citizen Budget Survey

This survey is on the Ethelo Citizen Budget platform. The survey questions this year were the same as in previous years to allow for year-to-year comparisons. The survey ran from October 7th to November 8th.

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 had 930 responses.

Best Budget Scenario

The "Best Scenario" shows an overwhelmingly positive reception, achieving extremely high approval and consensus metrics:

- Approval: 96%, indicating extremely favorable reception of the budget scenario.
- Consensus: 86%, demonstrating strong agreement among respondents on the proposed allocations.
- Support: 76%, reflecting robust backing for the scenario among participants.
- Conflict: Minimal conflict was noted at 6%, showing that differences in opinion were relatively rare.

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 best budget scenario resulted in an Adjusted Tax Total of \$2,697 per household, with a -0.81% adjustment compared to the previous year's tax allocations.

Service levels

Across the service areas, the majority of funding decisions favored maintaining current levels, including:

- Community Planning and Economic Development (68% approval)

- Stormwater Management (80% approval)
- Roads and Sidewalks (80% approval)
- Public Transit Services (69% approval)
- Parks, Trails, and Beautification (70% approval)
- Community Support Services (63% approval)
- Police Services (69% approval)
- Fire Protection Services (82% approval)
- Bylaw Enforcement Services (69% approval)
- Snow and Ice Control (78% approval)

Infrastructure Management was the only service area to receive support for a 5% increase (77% approval), while Corporate Services was the only area for which participants preferred a 5% decrease (69% approval). This is consistent with last year.

Service Area Importance

- Snow and Ice Control (**9.7%**) was identified as the most important service level
- Protective Services (**9.6%**)
- Police Services (**9.5%**)
- Roads and Sidewalks (**8.9%**)
- Infrastructure Management (**8.3%**)
- Parks, Trails, and Beautification (**8.1%**)
- Recreation and Community Services (**7.5%**)
- Stormwater Management (**7.6%**)
- Bylaw Enforcement Services (**6.8%**)
- Community Planning and Economic Development (**6.7%**)
- Community Support Services (**6.5%**)
- Public Transit Services (**5.6%**)
- Corporate Services (**5.2%**).

Service Area Satisfaction

Participants rated their satisfaction with service delivery on a scale from 0 to 10, reflecting public perception of quality and performance. Overall, data reveals that **neutral satisfaction levels (score 5)** were the most frequently selected response for nearly all services. However, notable differences emerge when comparing higher and lower satisfaction levels across specific services:

- High Satisfaction (Scores 6–10): Services such as Fire Protection, Parks, Trails, and Beautification, and Police Services consistently received higher satisfaction ratings, with significant proportions of respondents awarding scores in the upper range.
- Neutral Satisfaction (Score 5): Neutral responses dominated services like Corporate Services, Public Transit, and Bylaw Enforcement.
- Low Satisfaction (Scores 0–4): Services such as Community Planning and Infrastructure and Attracting and Retaining Business Development showed comparatively higher levels of dissatisfaction.

Comments

Analyzing open-ended responses on what key topics should be included in the City's 2025 budget reveal several recurring themes and issues that the community feels strongly about. This includes:

1. Infrastructure Maintenance and Upgrades

- **Roads and Sidewalks:** Many comments emphasize the need for proactive maintenance of roads and sidewalks, including better snow removal, sidewalk accessibility, and pothole repairs.
- **Aging Infrastructure:** Residents want a focus on replacing and upgrading aging infrastructure like water, sewer, and stormwater systems to avoid costly failures.
- **Snow Removal:** There is strong resistance to reducing snow-clearing services, especially for driveways, with many highlighting the challenges it poses for seniors and less mobile residents.

2. Safety and Policing

- **Downtown Safety:** A significant number of residents cite concerns about crime, drug use, and homelessness in the downtown core, making it unsafe and unappealing for families and businesses.
- **Law Enforcement Efficiency:** While some support increased funding for police, others question its effectiveness and advocate for alternative measures like mental health and social services.

3. Homelessness and Social Issues

- **Addressing Root Causes:** Many residents urge the city to collaborate with provincial and federal governments to address homelessness and addiction through long-term rehabilitation and housing solutions.
- **Community Impacts:** There is frustration about the perceived prioritization of services for homeless individuals over taxpayers and calls for stricter enforcement against vandalism and loitering.

4. Financial Responsibility

- **Tax Concerns:** There is strong resistance to further tax increases, with many advocating for better budget management, cutting unnecessary expenses, and focusing on core services.
- **Debt Reduction:** Several comments stress the importance of reducing debt and avoiding costly new projects until the budget is under control.
- **Administrative Costs:** A recurring sentiment is that administrative salaries and inefficiencies need to be reviewed and trimmed.

5. Economic Development

- **Attracting Businesses:** Residents want the city to focus on attracting businesses to increase the tax base, revitalize the downtown core, and provide more job opportunities.
- **Development Planning:** There are suggestions to encourage infill development rather than expanding geographically to reduce infrastructure costs.

6. Recreation and Community Services

- **Outdoor Activities:** Suggestions include expanding trails, parks, and recreational facilities, particularly for youth and non-team sports.

- Cultural and Performing Arts: While some support investment in cultural facilities like a performing arts center, others view these projects as secondary to core infrastructure needs.

7. Public Transit and Active Transportation

- Improving Transit: Residents express frustration with the current transit system, citing long travel times and overcrowding. Students and lower-income families are particularly affected.
- Bike Lanes and Trails: There is mixed feedback, with some calling for more cycling infrastructure and others opposing it, citing the city's long winters.

8. Accountability and Transparency

- City Leadership: Several comments criticize city council for wasteful spending and call for better accountability, such as third-party efficiency audits and more transparent decision-making processes.
- Public Engagement: Residents want more meaningful input on decisions affecting the budget and major projects, suggesting referendums or enhanced surveys.

Community Open House

While there were three townhall meetings held last year with a total attendance of approximately 46 people, this year the City hosted one event but made it longer with more interaction. The approximate attendance at the event this year was 45.

The event was held at the Civic Centre on October 30th from 3:30 to 8pm. It included an open house from 3:30 to 5:30 and presentations and questions from 5:30pm to 8:00pm:

- Several booths with staff available to answer questions. The booths included: bylaw, fire and rescue services, RCMP, police Support Services, Parks, Emergency Programs, and the library.
- 16 informative posters.
- 6 posters with sticker voting.
- A council corner where residents could chat with members of council.
- Service centre staff to record service requests.
- City trivia game run by communications staff.
- Paper surveys.

The presentations were given 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. This event was live streamed to the City's YouTube channel. There have been 168 views in total. Participants online and in person were able to ask questions via the Slido app during the event.

The posters with sticker voting showed:

- Protective services:
 - 3 increase budget
 - 1 keep budget the same
- Snow removal
 - 6 keep budget the same

- 2 reduce budget
- Infrastructure
 - 1 increase budget
 - 1 keep budget the same
 - 2 reduce budget
- Roads and sidewalks
 - 4 increase budget
 - 2 keep budget the same
- Events and arenas
 - 5 increase budget
 - 2 keep budget the same
 - 1 decrease budget
- Parks and trails
 - 16 increase budget
 - 2 keep budget the same

Promotion

Opportunities for the community to share their thoughts were promoted through:

- Three media releases
- Advertisements in print, radio and digital media
- Three e-newsletters
- Social media (free)
- Social media paid ads on Facebook and YouTube
- City Omnivex screens
- Posters in the community

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	15 ads + 5 live reads	UK	\$551.25
Radio	3 hours on location at open house	UK	\$1,181.25
TV	26 ads	UK	\$1,102.47
Newspaper	2 print ads	17,500 printed	\$1,249
Events calendar email blast	1	Open rate 861	0
Super Citizens e-news	3 emails	Open rate of 787	0

Facebook boosted	4 boosted posts	68,000	\$405
Facebook post	8 posts	17,796	0
Instagram post	6 posts	5,496	0
X post	7 posts	1,334	0
You Tube ad	1	30,810	\$124

Town hall expenses

Item	Cost
Room rentals: Civic Centre (including staff refreshments)	\$1,802.22
Audio visual rentals	\$4,703.25
Staff overtime	\$1,659.70
Printing costs for posters	\$1,268.96

The total cost of public engagement initiatives is \$14,047.10.

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 process.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

Eric Depenau, Director of Administrative Services

PREPARED BY: Julie Rogers, Communications Manager

APPROVED:

Walter Babicz, City Manager

Meeting Date: 2024/12/04