

STAFF REPORT TO FINANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

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DATE: August 8, 2025

TO: STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND AUDIT

NAME AND TITLE: Eric Depenau, Director of Administrative Services

SUBJECT: Budget 2026 Community Engagement

ATTACHMENT(S): None.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Standing Committee on Finance and Audit RECEIVES FOR INFORMATION the report dated August 8, 2025, from the Director of Administrative Services titled "Budget 2026 Community Engagement".

PURPOSE:

To provide an overview of how the City will seek public input into the 2026 municipal budget.

BACKGROUND:

The City annually presents opportunities for residents to provide input on municipal budget priorities. This has typically involved both digital and in-person opportunities. The results are provided to Council at the start of budget deliberations to aid in decision-making.

In 2024 the City, again provided a budget survey using the Citizen Budget platform as well as five additional service level satisfaction surveys. The five satisfaction surveys focused on important City services with a goal to understand how satisfied citizens are with the following services and receive their suggestions on improvements:

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

There was also a community town hall style meeting on October 30 in 2024 with a total attendance estimated at 45 residents. There were 20-25 staff in attendance at the meeting. The cost for the town hall event including room rentals, audio visual rentals, staff overtime and printing costs totaled roughly \$9,000.

In 2024 there were 941 responses to the Citizen Satisfaction Surveys (a total of 277 of these being paper surveys so making those copies available did make a difference) and for the Ethelo Citizen Budget survey there was 930 responses.

2026 budget engagement

To allow citizens to participate in more ways this year the following opportunities are proposed:

- A budget 2026 engagement page will be created on the City's Get Involved page on the website to host all the engagement opportunities and financial information. The page has FAQs to help residents understand municipal taxes, as well as links to relevant reports including the capital plan, corporate work plan and the 2024 Statement of Financial Information (SoFI).
- Social media will be used to promote the web site and direct people back to the page to take surveys and to learn more. It will also be used to prompt discussion, with the feedback pulled and analyzed before being shared with Directors and Council within the engagement results report.
- Beginning in September staff will launch the five satisfaction surveys via the new survey platform on the budget website. This is an opportunity for citizens to share their views on five core municipal services: parks and trails, events and recreation, roads and sidewalks, snow removal, and protective services. This will allow residents to provide feedback on their satisfaction with services that they are most interested in. Their feedback will assist staff in determining where to focus efforts and budget requests for 2026. These surveys will also be printed and available at City Hall and plans for seniors centres and the libraries, for those who prefer paper copies. Those responses will be manually entered by City staff.
- In late October, the annual Citizen Budget survey will launch. Due to the nature of the survey, it is only available digitally. Flyers and posters with QR codes to share the survey is an option being considered.
- Staff will work with the library to determine if computers and assistance might be available to assist citizens who would like to take the digital survey.
- These activities will be well advertised through media, social media, and traditional advertising.

In addition to all the above, there is a plan for several pop-up budget engagement events. The plan to be able to engage with more residents is to "meet the people where they are" rather than expect people to come to a budget town hall.

Pop-Up Budget Booths

City staff will host informal engagement booths at high-traffic community locations in October/early November, including:

- Pine Centre Mall (running from afternoon into evening (e.g. 3 p.m. – 8 p.m.) to make it more accessible)
- Pop-ups at CN Centre during an event

These pop-up events will provide residents with opportunities to ask questions, view budget materials, complete the satisfaction surveys, and share feedback directly with staff in a casual, approachable setting. Council is also invited to participate to talk to residents and hear their feedback. Any questions asked during these sessions that the team cannot answer will be documented and information sought from the subject matter experts as needed.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES:

This public engagement plan is in alignment with the Council priorities under the Pillar, City Government and Infrastructure.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

All costs are expected to fall within established budgets.

- The City has an existing contract with Ethelo for using the Citizen Budget platform this year so there are no additional costs associated with the survey.
- Advertising will be covered within the existing communications budget at an estimated \$3,000 - \$4,000.
- Venue costs will depend on the venues chosen. Pine Centre Mall will have a venue cost which is to be determined.
- There will be printing costs associated with posters and handout materials for the pop ups.
- Staff overtime costs will vary depending on the time, format, and length of the event.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

With the budget survey, five satisfaction surveys, and community pop up style event(s), this budget consultation is intended to be the most robust in several years, reflective of the new resources invested in the Communications Department in 2025. Community feedback will be presented to Finance & Audit at the December 3 meeting, prior to budget deliberations in January.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

Eric Depenau, Director, Administrative Services

PREPARED BY: Claire Thwaites, Communications Manager

Meeting Date: August 20, 2025

APPROVED: Walter Babicz, City Manager