

DATE: August 12, 2020

TO: STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND AUDIT

NAME AND TITLE: Rob van Adrichem, Director of External Relations

SUBJECT: Public Consultation Regarding City Budget Priorities

ATTACHMENT(S): None.

RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Standing Committee on Finance and Audit:

1. DIRECTS Administration to proceed with a public engagement program as broadly outlined in the report dated August 12, 2020, from the Director of External Relations, titled “Public Consultation Regarding City Budget Priorities”; and
2. PROVIDES Administration with flexibility in their deployment of a public engagement program recognizing the evolving conditions and circumstances related to 2021 budget preparation and the COVID-19 pandemic.

PURPOSE:

To provide an overview of how the City will be seeking public input into the 2021 budget, recognizing the unique circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

BACKGROUND:

The City annually presents opportunities for residents to provide input on budget priorities. Since 2015, this has occurred as part of Talktober and included in-person events coupled with an online survey called Citizen Budget. Prior to 2015, a telephone survey was conducted by a company specializing in gathering and analyzing public opinion. The results are provided to Council at the start of budget deliberations.

Providing opportunities for public input is central to many local government processes, such as those involving the rezoning of land or when borrowing is required for capital projects. Beyond these statutory public engagement opportunities, timely public input that captures diverse perspectives contributes to better decision-making and the delivery of programs and services that are affordable and appreciated by residents. To that end, in 2019 the City provided select staff with training from the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2); many of the staff who participated in this training are now members of the City’s “public engagement team” and bring IAP2 perspectives and best practices to City public engagement opportunities. The members of the team represent units that are responsible for City finances, infrastructure, planning, recreation, and public communication. Recent consultation has occurred on budget priorities, climate action, and local child care services. The City has also recently completed a survey about the Pidherny recreation area

on the Ethelo survey platform, which is also what the City uses for collecting budget priorities. In fact, Ethelo's "Citizen Budget" interface is being used by 30 local governments in Canada. A notable feature of Citizen Budget is that when survey respondents provide their personal property assessment, the figures in the survey are adjusted to their situation and show how their choices about City budget priorities would affect their personal tax bill.

Public Engagement about current financial challenges and the 2021 Budget

Public engagement about the budget is being affected by the COVID pandemic. For one, the pandemic is causing unprecedented financial challenges and efforts to close the significant financial gap would benefit from public input. Secondly, ongoing public health orders concerning the size of gatherings and physical distancing is restricting the ability to host in-person meetings. This report outlines how the City will address both of these challenges and still deliver an enhanced budget consultation for 2021.

An expanded Citizen Budget survey on the Ethelo platform

The popularity of online surveys has been growing. The Citizen Budget survey in 2019 (for the 2020 budget) was the most popular since the survey began in 2015, with nearly 300 residents providing input. In addition, the most recent City survey, about the Pidherny Recreation Area, attracted approximately 800 responses. Online surveys are also cost-effective: switching to Citizen Budget in 2015 to gather public input on budget priorities from approximately the same number of respondents as the telephone survey allowed the City to save approximately \$12,000 per year.

The survey will precede Council's budget deliberations and include the same questions that have previously been asked – focused on preferred funding levels for various City functions – so that year-over-year trends, as well as exceptions, can be noted. However, given the City's exceptional financial circumstances, additional themes are being explored and can be shaped by the members of the Finance and Audit Committee:

- Effects of the pandemic on households/businesses
- Citizen preferences for services and service levels
- Support for specific initiatives that could result in significant additional revenues for the City such as the sale of City lands, increased user fees, and the ongoing closure of civic recreation facilities

It is proposed that two versions of the survey – one for residents, one for businesses – be delivered online.

Public awareness of the survey will be achieved through various activities. These include the summer/fall utility notices, media relations, social media posts, digital advertising, a feature on the City website/homepage and app, targeted communications to community organizations and associations, posters/flyers, and amplification/sharing of posts by individuals/influencers. Extra effort will be made to ensure that a diverse and broad spectrum of the population is given the opportunity to provide feedback. In fact, since the launch of the new City website in 2017, the City has enabled residents to subscribe to receive email notifications about opportunities to provide feedback. Currently, there are more than 450 subscribers to this category, roughly double the number from this time last year.

While the survey would be primarily available online, printed versions could be available. Submissions could also be accepted on the phone via the Service Centre.

A public forum in Council Chambers

In advance of the 2017 referendum about the pool and fire hall, the City used the telecommunications infrastructure in Council Chambers to host a digital forum that provided an opportunity for the Mayor, staff, and project experts to answer questions about the projects that were provided by residents through the local media. Residents could watch the event live on the City website (using the same technology used to stream Council meetings) or view a recording. Two of these events were held and had a total of 1500 “live” views; the recordings were subsequently viewed about 15,000 times on Facebook and on the City YouTube channel. They were also broadcast on Shaw Cable.

A similar event focused on the current fiscal challenges is being explored for this fall. Council Chambers provides an ideal venue given its technical capacity for livestreaming and the recent improvements oriented to safety. Logistics are still being developed.

Comparisons with other municipalities

The City routinely compares itself with other municipalities. During Talktober 2019, a peer group of municipalities (Kamloops, Nanaimo, Red Deer, Lethbridge, and Thunder Bay) was identified in order to compare historical development, population change and density, tax levels, and infrastructure age. The analysis revealed a unique pattern of development for Prince George that has resulted in it being very large, with low population density, and old infrastructure compared to its peer group.

The public engagement team is reviewing these five comparison municipalities to identify COVID-related impacts and the related citizen engagement initiatives they are undertaking. More broadly, the team is also connecting with the IAP2 network and with other municipalities using Ethelo and Citizen Budget to identify best practices for citizen engagement during the current pandemic.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

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. Survey development and advertising will be covered by the existing Talktober budget.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:

The City is currently facing an unprecedented funding shortfall that has been created by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the pandemic is the catalyst for public engagement on how to possibly address the shortfall, it also affects how the City can conduct public engagement. In this regard, this report outlines three initiatives for how the City will approach public participation in ways that are accessible, effective, and in compliance with public health orders and recommendations.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:

Rob van Adrichem, Director of External Relations

APPROVED:

Kathleen Soltis, City Manager

Meeting Date: 2020/08/17