

# STAFF REPORT TO FINANCE AND AUDIT COMMITTEE

1100 Patricia Blvd. | Prince George, BC, Canada V2L 3V9 | [www.princegeorge.ca](http://www.princegeorge.ca)

**DATE:** December 1, 2020

**TO:** STANDING COMMITTEE ON FINANCE AND AUDIT

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

**SUBJECT:** 2021 Budget Consultation

**ATTACHMENT(S):** None

## RECOMMENDATION(S):

That the Standing Committee on Finance and Audit RECEIVES FOR INFORMATION the report dated December 1, 2020, from the Director of External Relations, titled "2021 Budget Consultation."

## PURPOSE:

The City annually reaches out to the public for input into budget priorities. In fact, public consultation regarding the financial plan is required in Section 166 of the Community Charter. Over the last several years, this consultation has occurred via telephone surveys, in-person events, and web-based surveys. Because these consultations have occurred in the fall, prior to budget deliberations, they evolved into a specific program of public engagement known as Talktober.

The Covid-19 pandemic forced the City to re-think its approach to budget consultation in 2020. As endorsed by the Finance and Audit Committee and Council in August, the consultation this year has involved three components:

- An online public forum (the Talktober Town Hall, held on October 27, 2020)
- An expanded online budget survey, with additional components meant to gather information about local Covid-19 effects, the satisfaction and perceived importance of City services, and ways to address the financial gap that has been created by the pandemic (Citizen Budget survey period: October 21 to November 8, 2020)
- A review of the public engagement activities of other comparator municipalities: Kamloops, Nanaimo, Lethbridge, Red Deer, and Thunder Bay

This report on the results of budget consultation is intended to provide Council with information that can be used during deliberations for the 2021 budget.

## DEVELOPING THE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT PROGRAM:

The City's public consultation regarding the budget was led by its Public Engagement Team. This group is made up of staff who have experience in public engagement and have received training from the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2). They represent multiple functions within the City including finance, planning, infrastructure management, parks and recreation, social development, and public messaging.

The budget survey platform used by the City allows respondents to enter their property assessment in order to see how much of their property taxes is allocated to the City, and in turn allocated to various civic services. For the first time, respondents had the opportunity to select the residential or commercial tax rate. Initially, the Public Engagement Team worked to categorize civic operations in ways that would be intuitive and practical for public engagement – and to demonstrate the relative cost of funding these service areas. The team opted to organize the service areas by function and operation rather than by administrative structure (ie. “Parks, Trails, and Beautification” rather than “Parks and Solid Waste Services”).

Service areas:

- Police Services
- Fire Protection
- Bylaw Enforcement
- Snow and Ice Control
- Roads and Sidewalks
- Public Transit
- Recreation and Community Facilities
- Parks, Trails, and Beautification
- Community Support
- Attracting/retaining business and facilitating development
- Community Planning and Infrastructure
- Environmental Management and Climate Action
- Corporate Services

*Note: services such as water, sanitary sewer, and solid waste services for curbside garbage collection were not included in the survey because they are funded by utility fees and not property taxes.*

The Public Engagement Team also developed three questions aimed at understanding some of the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic in Prince George, and specifically how these effects might relate to the City budget and civic operations. The questions concerned income levels, confidence in the local economy, and use of parks, trails, and sidewalks for things like walking and biking.

The development of the survey was informed by the experiences of other comparator municipalities. For example, Kamloops, Lethbridge, and Red Deer all now use the same budget survey platform as the City of Prince George. Thunder Bay is currently in the midst of a budget survey. Yellowknife provided a model for relevant questions about the local impacts of the pandemic.

Because of restrictions on in-person events, the Mayor’s office organized a virtual Talktober event using Zoom that provided residents with the ability to ask questions and identify priorities, just like the in-person neighbourhood and downtown events that have been held in recent years. The timing of this event coincided with the availability of the online budget survey, for the purposes of cross-promotion and for demonstrating diverse opportunities for engaging with the City.

Finally, the launch of the budget consultation activities – largely because the pandemic required these activities to be exclusively online – prompted the Public Engagement Team and External Relations to develop and launch a public engagement hub on the City website. Located at [www.princegeorge.ca/getinvolved](http://www.princegeorge.ca/getinvolved), this web page consolidates various opportunities for the public to have input into civic processes and operations, including surveys, public hearings, and membership on City committees. This page will also be the portal through which the City will communicate the results of public engagement opportunities.

#### **PUBLIC AWARENESS AND PARTICIPATION:**

Critical to any public engagement activity is public awareness of the opportunity. With the advice of the Public Engagement Team, External Relations deployed a public information campaign that involved multiple elements:

A printed notice enclosed in approximately 18,000 utility bills sent out in August.

A media release on day one of the survey, promoting both the survey and the town hall followed by news articles in all local media outlets.

Various posts on the City facebook, twitter, Instagram, and youtube channels. Social media activity was concentrated around a short video introduction from Mayor Hall, a slideshow/video highlighting the service areas, and various invitations to join the town hall and participate in the survey.

Advertisements on local radio stations and on the websites for local news media



An email about the budget survey and town hall distributed to subscribers of the City's email notification system. A total of 1800 residents received this email. Currently, nearly 700 people have subscribed to receive media releases directly to their email inbox and 650 subscribe to receive email notifications about public consultations and information sessions.

Link on the City homepage and various other internal pages directly related to the service categories.

Digital displays and posters in civic facilities, such as City Hall.

Some of the elements of the promotional campaign were similar to previous years. These include media relations, displays in civic facilities, prominence on the website, and social media posts. Last year, for example, the mayor similarly did a short video communicating about public engagement opportunities through Talktober. Some differences in 2020:

- A Youtube boost of the mayor's video.
- A notice in utility bill mail-outs.
- An increase in City social media followers and a significant increase in subscribers receiving email notifications of public engagement opportunities (approximately double over the same time period last year).
- Advertisements both on radio and on the websites of the local media outlets.
- Creation of the Get Involved web page and links to the survey from multiple relevant web pages within the City website.

The results from the public information campaign indicate a high level of public awareness of the recent public engagement. In fact, the Mayor's short video about the budget survey and town hall was viewed about 25,000 times across the City social media platforms (with the greatest number of views on YouTube). Overall, the City's

social media posts about the town hall and budget survey had a high level of engagement, contributing to high levels of exposure.

Total reach of posts:

- Facebook – 47,949
- Instagram – 25,429
- Twitter – 11,407
- LinkedIn – 1,668
- YouTube – 19,759 views of the Mayor’s promotional video

*Some of the social media posts were supported by a modest ad buy, which is outlined in the Financial Considerations section of this report.*

In addition to the social media posts, paid advertising broadened the reach of information about the budget survey and town hall. Radio advertisements ran over the course of one week on The Drive, The River, The Goat, and Country 97FM. The stations report weekly listenership of about 76,000 people total. The ads on the media websites appeared nearly 153,000 times, generating 120 clicks to the Get Involved web page.

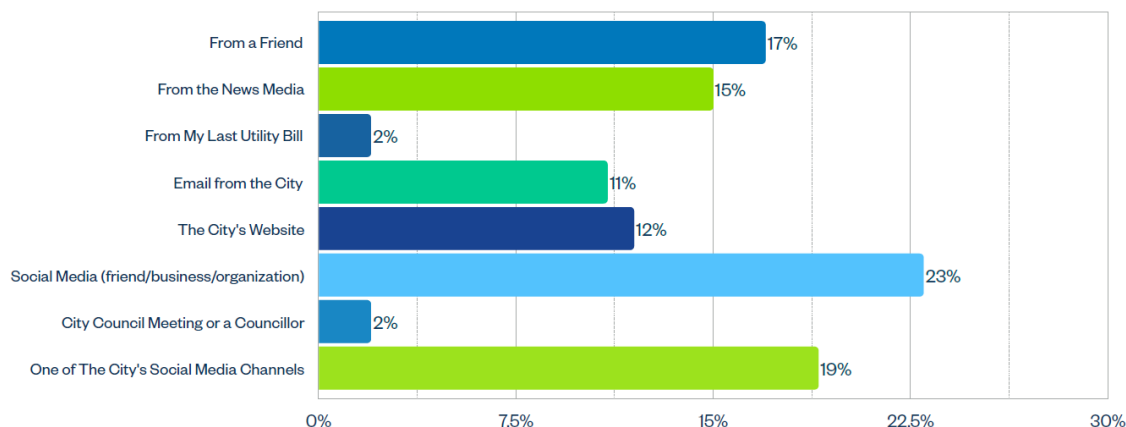
The public awareness campaign was aimed at encouraging attendance for the Talktober town hall and participation in the online budget survey:

Town Hall – the Talktober town hall hosted by Mayor Hall attracted 43 registrations via zoom and another 50 who watched the event live via the City’s facebook channel. To date, the recording, which is available on the City’s YouTube and Facebook channels, has had a total of 1,300 views.

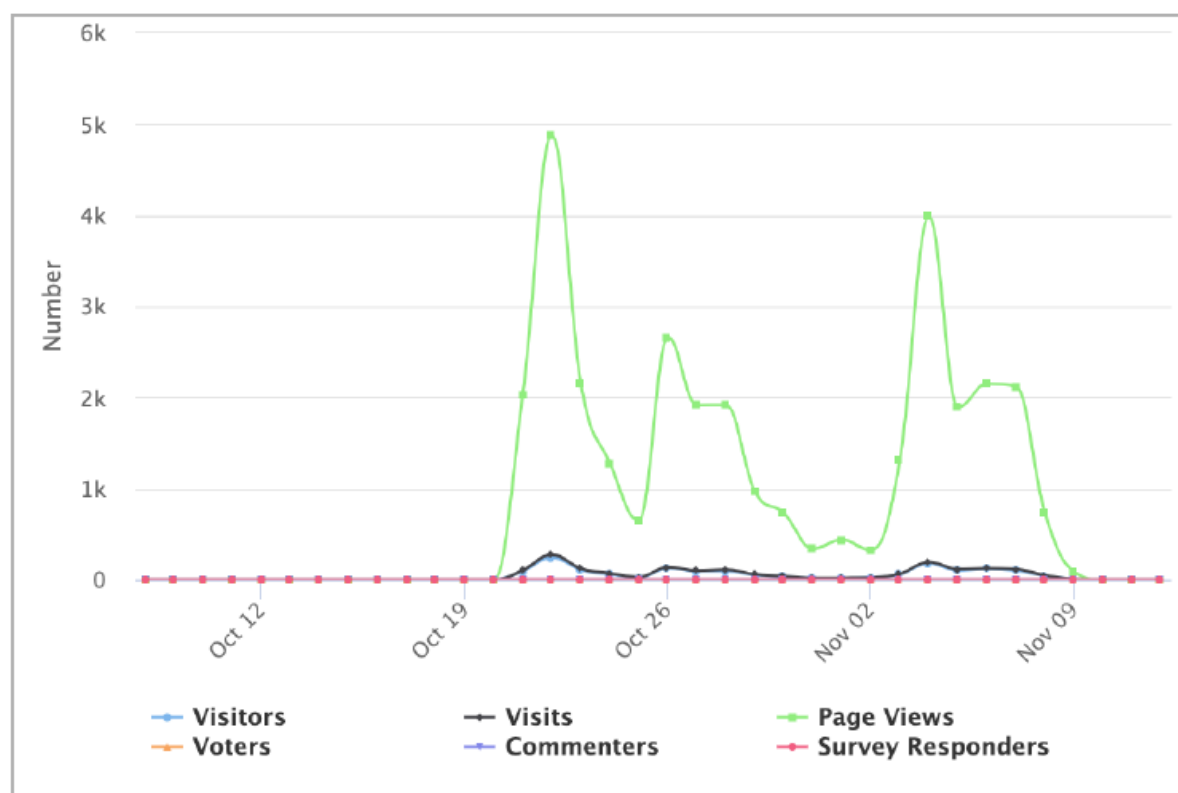
Budget survey – 1020 people provided input via the budget survey. The average over the last four years has been 170.

One of the survey questions asked participants how they heard of the survey:

## How did you hear about this survey?



Participation spiked at the beginning of the survey, during and after the Talktober town hall, and when the service area slide show / video was posted on social media:



Approximately two-thirds of survey participants accessed the survey through the City’s new public engagement hub: [princegeorge.ca/getinvolved](https://princegeorge.ca/getinvolved). This web page was promoted in the news release, advertisements, social media posts, and during the Talktober town hall.

#### RESULTS: BUDGET SURVEY

Of the 1020 participants, nearly 70% have lived in Prince George for more than ten years. Only 6% of survey respondents have been living in Prince George for two years or less.

Approximately 60% of respondents provided their property assessment so that the financial figures provided throughout the survey would be customized for them, and about 30 respondents selected the commercial tax rate. The remaining 40% used the default, which provided the representative home value at the residential tax rate.

#### The service areas

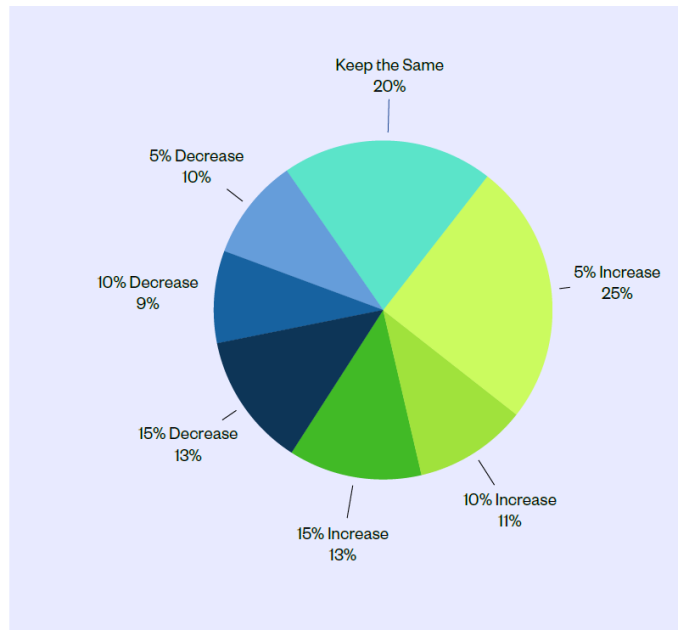
For each of the 13 service areas, respondents were asked to indicate whether funding for the service areas should stay the same, be increased, or be decreased (+/- 15%), based on 2020 budget allocations.

*Note: The order of the results below matches the order that the service areas appeared in the survey.*

## Police Services

"Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Police Services?"\*

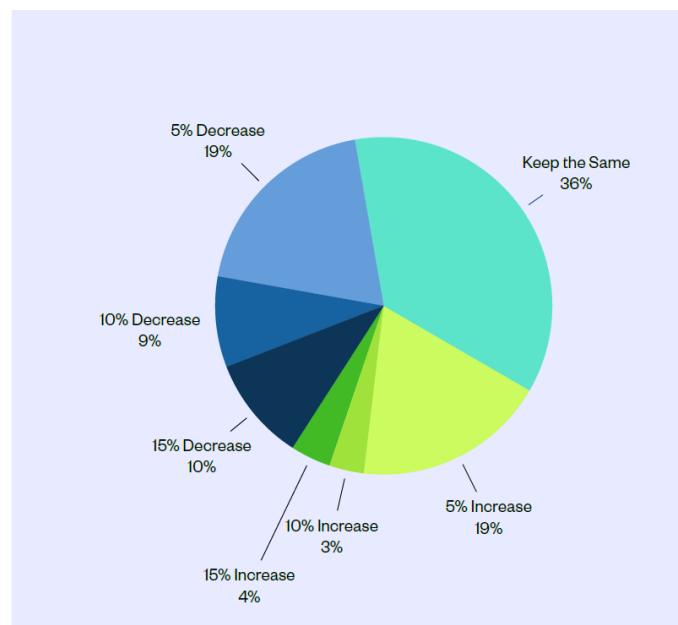
- **Increase: 49%**
- Decrease: 32%
- Keep the Same: 20%



## Fire Protection Services

"Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Fire Protection Services?"

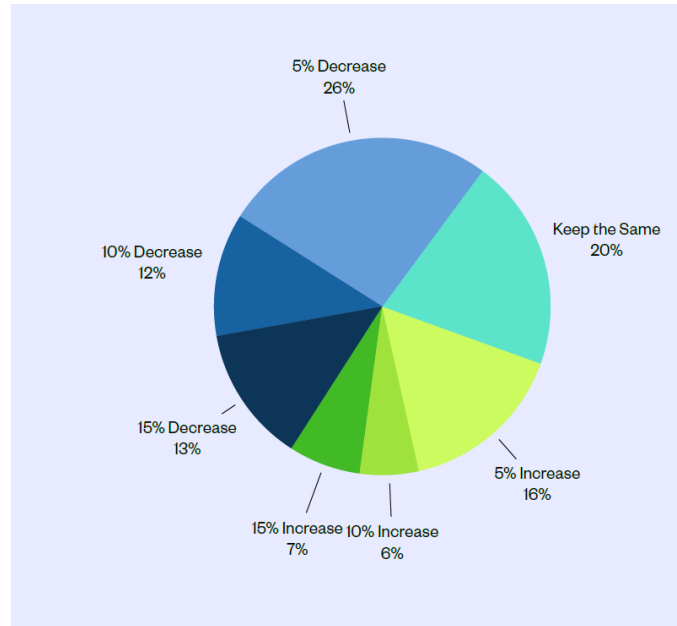
- Increase: 26%
- **Decrease: 38%**
- Keep the Same: 36%



## Bylaw Enforcement Services

"Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Bylaw Enforcement Services?"

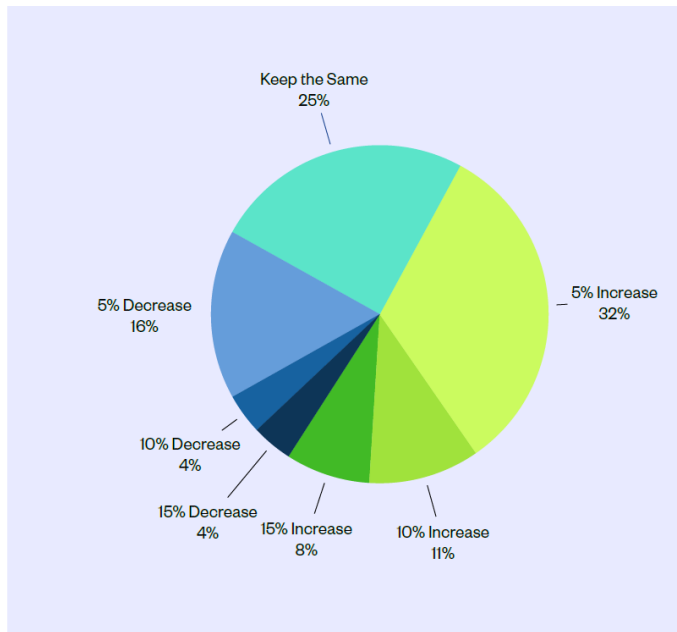
- Increase: 29%
- **Decrease: 51%**
- Keep the Same: 20%



## Roads and Sidewalks

"Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Roads and Sidewalks?"

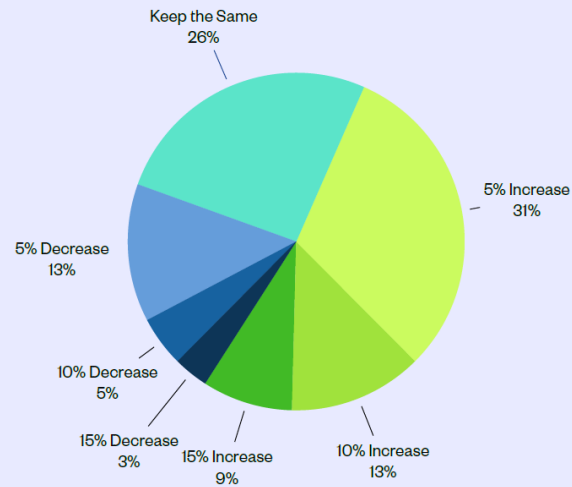
- **Increase: 51%**
- Decrease: 24%
- Keep the Same: 25%



## Snow and Ice Control

"Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Snow and Ice Control?"

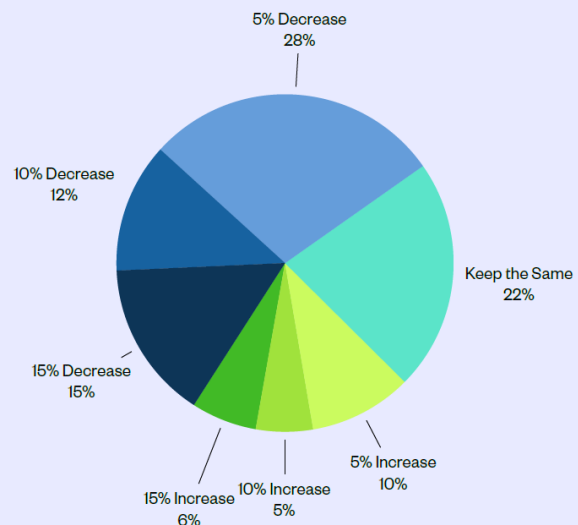
- **Increase: 53%**
- Decrease: 21%
- Keep the Same: 26%



## Public Transit Services

"Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Public Transit Services?"\*

- Increase: 21%
- **Decrease: 55%**
- Keep the Same: 22%

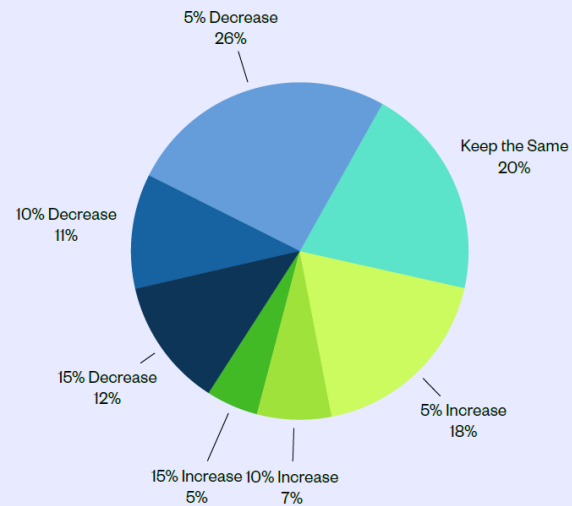




## Recreation and Community Services

"Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Recreation and Community Facilities?"\*

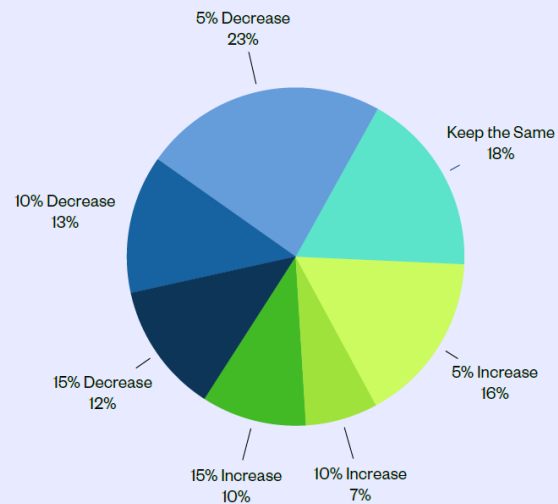
- Increase: 30%
- **Decrease: 49%**
- Keep the Same: 20%



## Community Support Services

"Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Community Support services?"\*

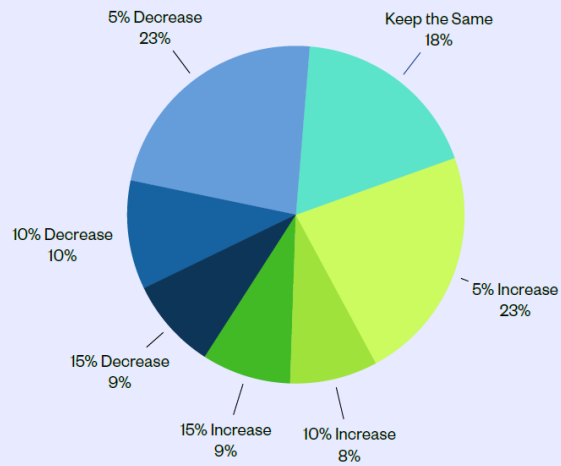
- Increase: 33%
- **Decrease: 48%**
- Keep the Same: 18%



## Parks, Trails, and Beautification

“Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Parks, Trails, and Beautification?”

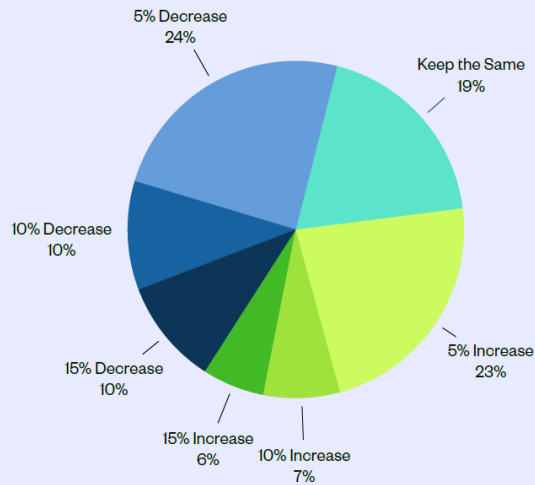
- Increase: 40%
- **Decrease: 42%**
- Keep the Same: 18%



## Community Planning and Infrastructure

“Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Community Planning and Infrastructure?”\*

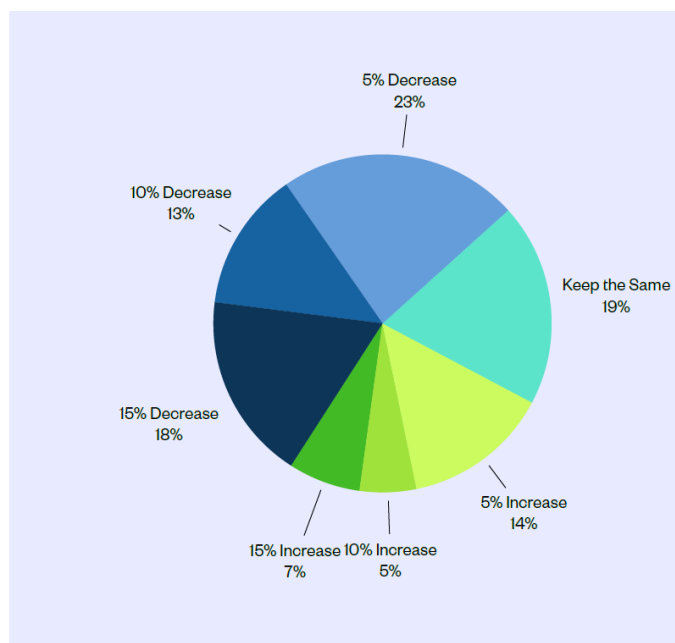
- Increase: 36%
- **Decrease: 44%**
- Keep the Same: 19%



## Services that attract and retain business and facilitate development

"Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for attracting/retaining business and facilitating development?"\*

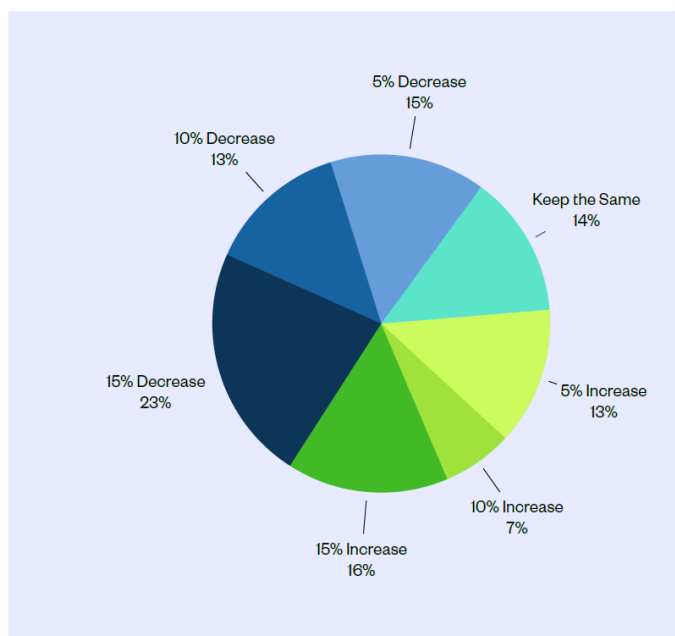
- Increase: 26%
- **Decrease: 54%**
- Keep the Same: 19%



## Environmental Management and Climate Action

"Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Environmental Management and Climate Action?"\*

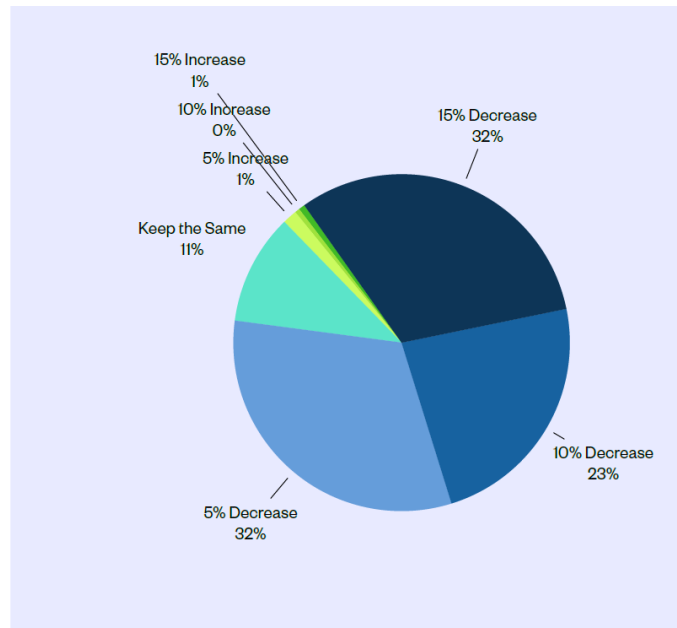
- Increase: 36%
- **Decrease: 51%**
- Keep the Same: 14%



## Corporate Services

“Would you choose to increase, decrease, or maintain the current level of funding for Corporate Services?”

- Increase: 2%
- **Decrease: 87%**
- Keep the Same: 11%



In summary, respondents suggested an increase in funding for Police Services, Roads and Sidewalks, and Snow and Ice Control. Decreases in funding were identified for Fire Protection, Bylaw Enforcement, Public Transit, Recreation and Community Services, Community Support Services, Parks, Trails, and Beautification, Community Planning and Infrastructure, Services that Attract and Retain Businesses and Facilitate Development, Environmental Management and Climate Action, and Corporate Services. It should be noted that Fire Protection had the largest “keep the same level of funding” result, and Parks, Trails, and Beautification was almost equally split between respondents suggesting an increase in funding and those suggesting a decrease. The service area with the highest percentage of +15% votes was Environmental Management and Climate Action; Corporate Services had the highest percentage of respondents suggesting a decrease in funding of 15%.

## Comparison with Previous Years

Since 2016, the City budget survey has provided an opportunity for respondents to indicate whether they feel funding levels for service areas should stay the same, increase, or decrease. The 2020 results reveal some similarities and differences:

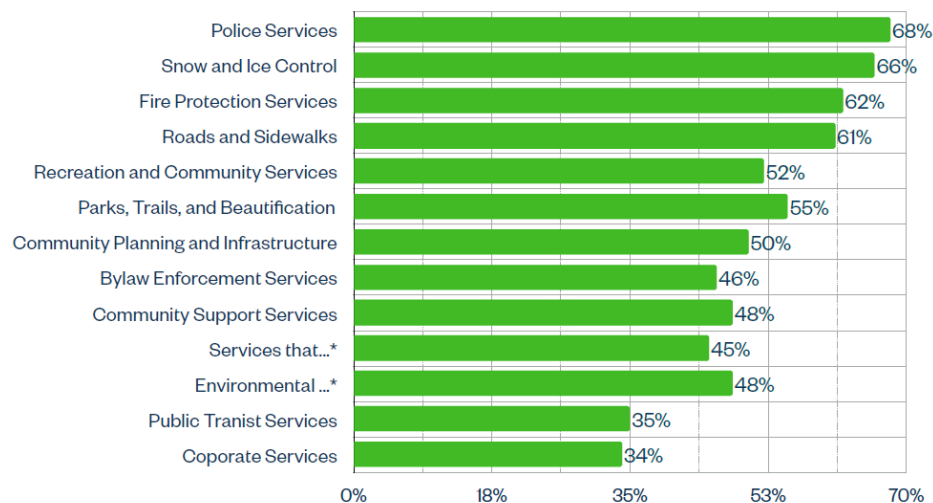
- Service area funding: It's normal for police services, snow and ice control, and transportation infrastructure (roads and sidewalks) to receive preferences for an increase in funding and for all other areas to be suggested for a decrease in funding. Over the past four years, the only other service areas to be identified for an increase in funding were fire protection (once), recreation services (once), and parks and trails (once). Similarly, it's normal for Corporate Services to be identified for a decrease in funding.
- In previous years, the single-most popular selection for service area funding was for the budget to stay the same. In 2020, this happened in only one category: fire protection.
- In previous years, 25-40% of visitors to the survey website actually chose to participate in the survey. In 2020, it was 67%.
- Over the past four years, the average number of residents who participated in the budget survey was 170. In 2020, it was 1,020.

In addition to questions about the **funding** of service areas, new questions in 2020 were aimed at both identifying the **importance** of the various service areas, as well as how respondents feel the City is **performing** in delivering them. The following page indicates responses for how *important* the different service areas are to respondents, and how satisfied respondents are in regards to how they feel the City is *performing* in delivering these services.

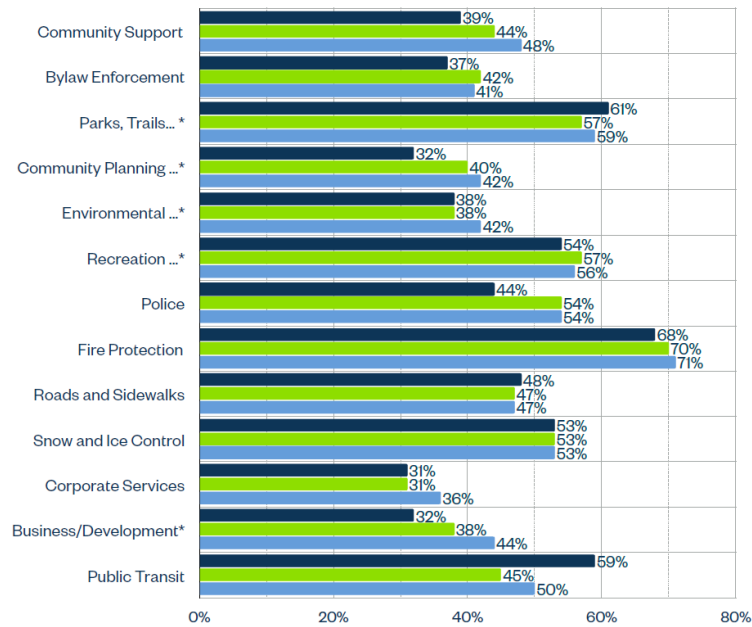
## Importance of Services

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### Importance of Services

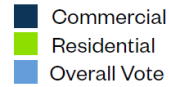


## Satisfaction with Performance



## Satisfaction with Services\*

These metrics explore how each voter set, **Commercial tax voters** and **Residential tax votes**, rated their satisfaction with each City Service.

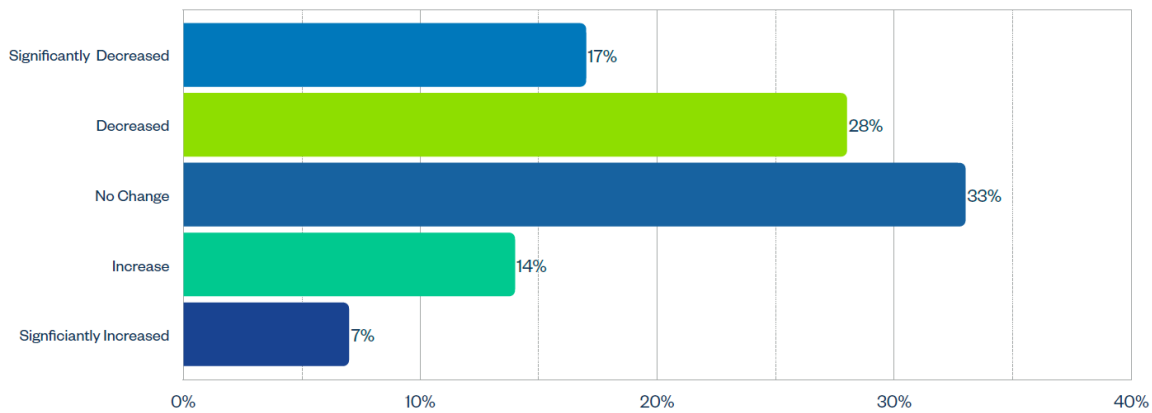


## COVID-19

Three questions were aimed at understanding the local effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The results show a decline in local income levels, reduced confidence in Prince George's economy, and significantly increased use of parks, trails, and sidewalks for things like walking and biking. In fact, on a scale of 1-100 (with 100 being significantly increased), the single-most popular response to whether the pandemic affected use of outdoor areas was 100.

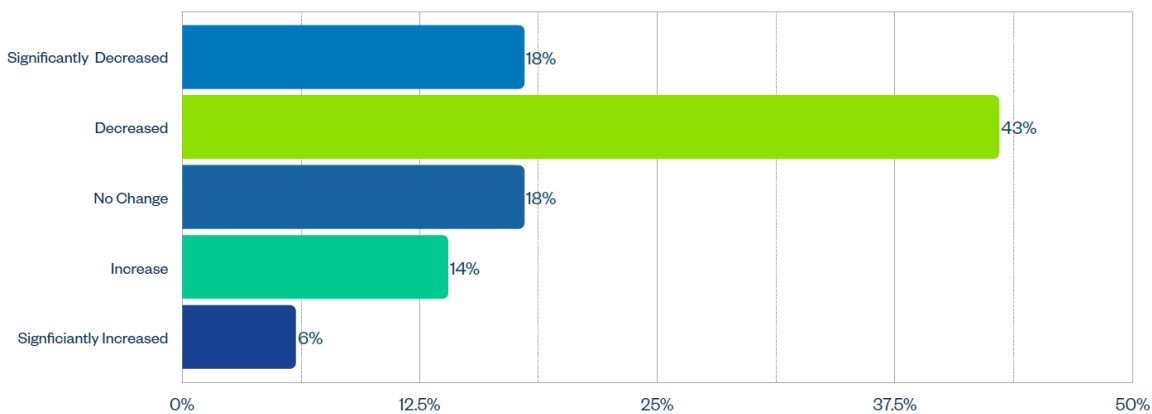
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### Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Income Levels in Your Home/Business?\*



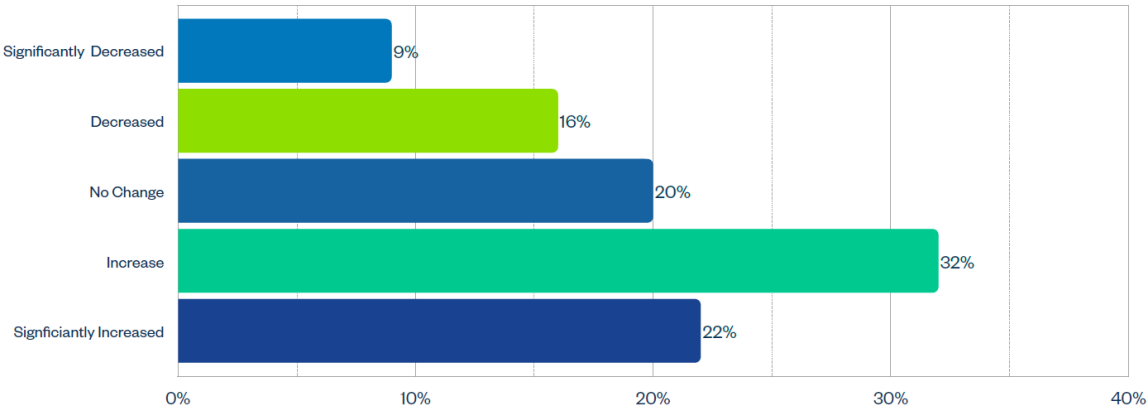
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### Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected the Confidence You Feel in Prince George And its Economy?\*



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## Has the COVID-19 Pandemic Affected Your Use of the Outdoor Areas?



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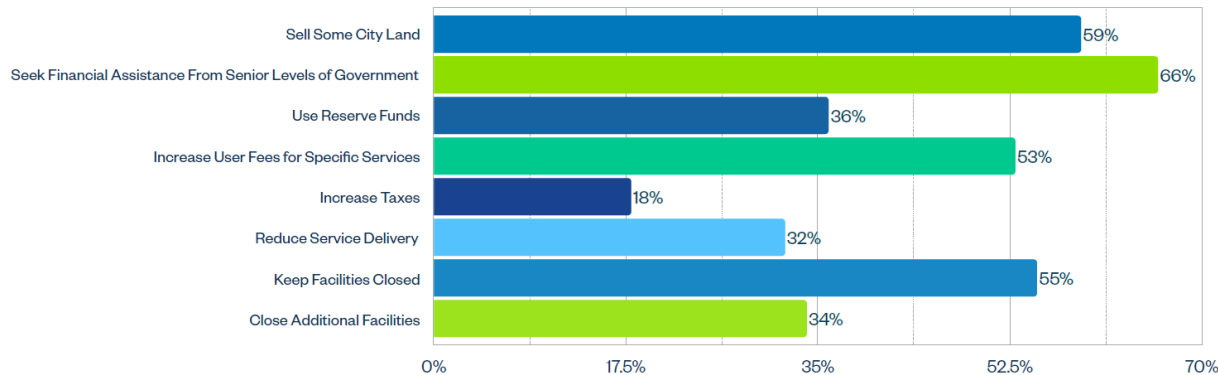
### Addressing the Gap and Budgeting for 2021

Respondents could select from a list to identify ways that the City could address the loss of revenue to continue providing civic services. Respondents could choose more than one option.

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## What Are Some Things We Should Do in Prince George to Help Attract Additional Revenues or Reduce Costs?\*

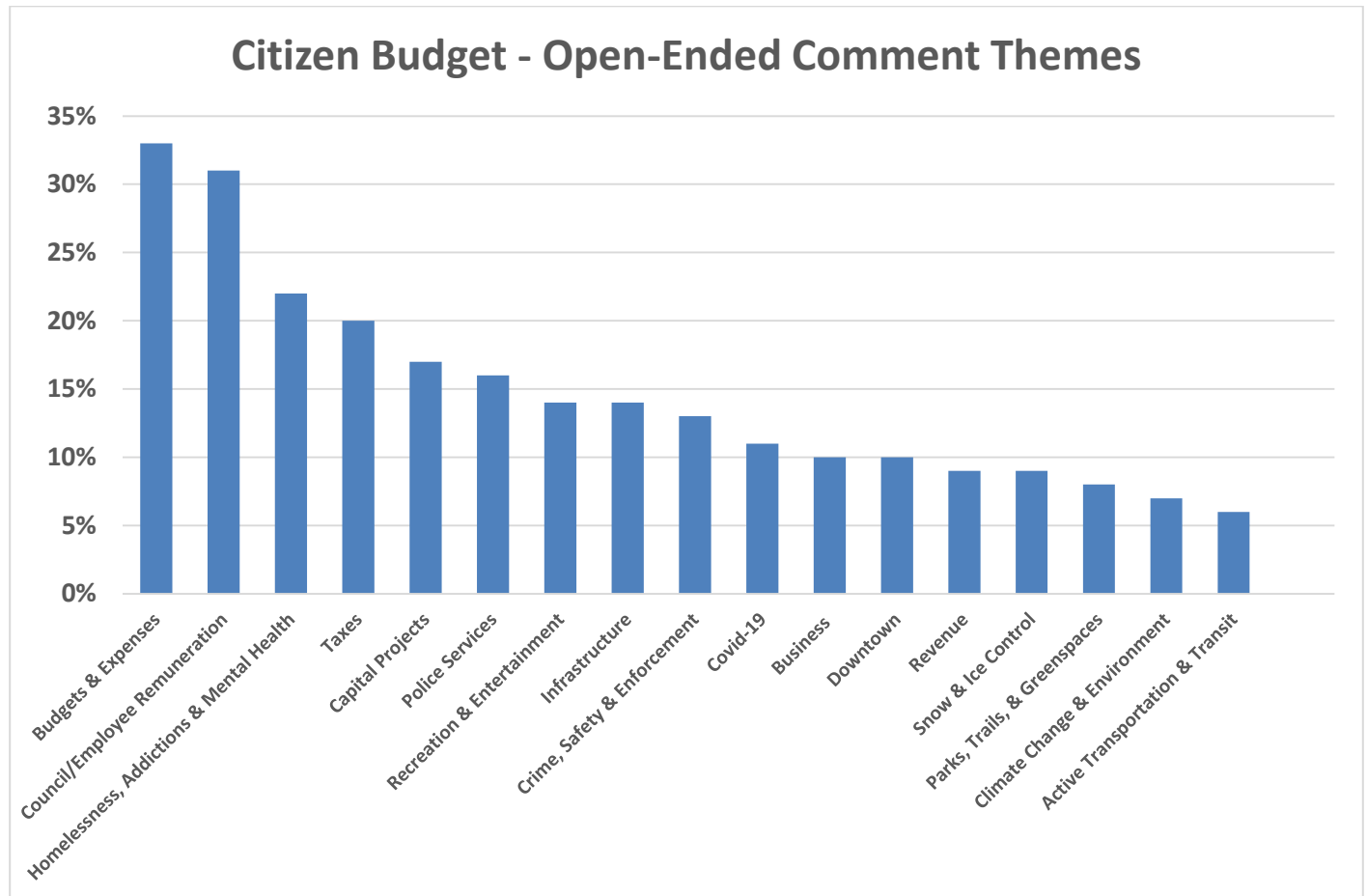
The COVID-19 pandemic has greatly reduced revenues coming into the City from such things as user fees, facility rentals, gaming, and transit ridership. Together with other sources of revenue such as property taxes, these fund services to residents of Prince George.





Respondents could also provide a free-from response to the question of what key topics the City should consider as it establishes its 2021 budget. Just over 600 responses – representing just under two-thirds of respondents – were submitted.

Analysis of these responses reveals great diversity in topics, concerns, and suggestions.



#### RESULTS: TALKOBER TOWN HALL

The Talktober town hall on October 27 provided another example of the diverse topics that are of concern to residents. Over the course of the nearly two-hour event, residents posed about 30 questions to the Mayor, who responded to each of them (occasionally with the assistance of staff).

The topics covered during the event included:

- Parking downtown and throughout the community
- Funding for capital projects and infrastructure maintenance
- Crime in the downtown and other areas of the community
- Social issues such as homelessness
- Road and Sidewalk rehabilitation
- Closing and re-opening arenas and public facilities during the pandemic
- Reducing staff overtime and salaries

#### **FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:**

The costs for the 2020 budget consultation include the actual survey platform, the delivery of the Talktober town hall, and promotion of both the town hall and the survey.

Ad buy for radio stations: \$2,065

Ad buy for media websites: \$1,340

Printing of utility bill notice: \$1,139

Youtube boost: \$466

Facebook post boosts: \$240

Instagram boosts: \$75

Blake Productions for the town hall: \$1,526

Ethelo: \$5,000 for an annual membership, providing unlimited surveys and related results

**Total: \$11,851**

#### **SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION:**

The 2020 budget consultation was conducted in late October and early November. It included a virtual town hall hosted by the Mayor as well as a budget survey that was expanded from previous years.

This report provides the results of the questions that were asked in the survey and a summary of topics raised during the town hall.

The COVID-19 pandemic is highlighting the importance of connecting with residents in ways that are digital and “COVID-friendly.” In this regard, members of the Public Engagement Team will continue to connect with comparator municipalities to identify ideas and determine trends/similarities/differences between Prince George and other communities that are of a similar population/profile. Members will also continue to work with Ethelo to build on the experience of 2020 to both increase and improve opportunities for residents to contribute to City decision-making via web-based public engagement.

#### **RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED:**

Rob van Adrichem, Director, External Relations

#### **APPROVED:**

Walter Babicz, Acting City Manager

Meeting Date: 2020/12/07