
Memorandum

To: Budget Standing Committee

From: Maggie Riopelle, Executive Research Assistant,
Commission of Corporate Services

Date: October 29, 2015

Subject: Community Engagement for the 2016 Budget

Budget deliberations involve difficult decision-making in that the Budget Standing Committee must balance the needs and requirements for services with taxpayer affordability.

Public involvement in the budget process can be both valuable and beneficial. By engaging the public, we can increase the community's knowledge and understanding of the budget including any identified opportunities and challenges, as well as the allocation of resources.

As well, public involvement allows for a fuller understanding of which municipal services are important to the taxpayer. Garnering participation from our community, however, has proven to be a challenge. To encourage additional public engagement, staff recommends a number of enhancements to compliment current efforts.

A) Current Budget Engagement Process

- **Report:** Full budget document printed annually with overview, highlights and line-by-line budgets for every City department.
- **Meetings:** Council's budget meetings (Committee or Council) are open to the public with agendas and meeting minutes posted online.
- **Open House:** Multiple open houses hosted in various locations. Historically low turnout. Held to encourage public to ask questions and provide feedback regarding the City's budget.
- **Budget Night:** One meeting held for Council budget discussion and approval, open to public.
- **Other Budget Engagement Tools:** Online Citizens' Budget (2014), Telephone Town Hall (2015).

Online Citizens Budget

The Citizens Budget provided residents with the opportunity to go online and rate how much money should be spent on services such as transit, culture, public works and emergency services.

It also allowed participants a good interactive and visual representation of the impact of spending more in one area on the other services. People were also able to provide comments and suggestions. With 811 visitors to the online budget tool, there were 204 responses or individuals who actively participated in the online budget tool.

Telephone Town Hall

Last year a Telephone Town Hall was used as a new engagement tool. Some 15,000 homes were contacted and provided the opportunity to answer four survey questions, listen in to budget discussions and ask questions. At the peak, there were nearly 500 callers on the line.

At the end of the town hall, there were more than 20 messages left by participants. A large number of the individuals supported this new method of engagement, noting it should continue in the future as it assisted seniors and people with disabilities become part of the process. It was also noted that the Telephone Town Hall provided information to individuals, who are not typically engaged in the process.

A request for quotes has been issued to a number of providers, should the Budget Standing Committee be interested in using this format for the 2016 Budget process.

B) Potential New Budget Engagement Process

- **Report:** Full budget document printed annually as well as a new budget highlights booklet.
- **Meetings:** New Budget Standing Committee meetings are open to the public with agendas and meeting minutes posted online.
- **Open House:** Held to encourage public to ask questions and provide feedback regarding the City's budget. Recommend one open house with more promotion leading up to event to encourage a higher turnout. Costs to promote the meeting are dependent on communication format and method.
- **Budget Night:** Potential two-night budget meeting to allow presentation of budget, then following night Council can make decisions.
- **Other Budget Engagement Tools:** Telephone Town Hall.
- **Online/social media:** Use online avenues to promote Committee and Council budget meetings to the public; Develop targeted budget questions to ask online followers for feedback; Opportunity to reach out to younger, more tech savvy users.