

Report from Financial Management Services, Director

Date of Report: November 21, 2018

Date of Meeting: November 28, 2018

Report Number: FMS-B029-2018

File: 10.57.12

Subject: 2019 Operating Budget, Telephone Town Hall – Public Engagement Results

Recommendation

That the Budget Standing Committee receive this report for information purposes

Background

Annually during budget deliberations, Budget Standing Committee (BSC), City staff and Council are faced with the challenge of finding balance between maintaining City services and programs at an effective level and a tax increase that is reasonable to residents. Public input into the budget deliberation process can be invaluable for residents, members of the BSC and Council as a whole to support that balance.

While the City hosts budget open houses as part of the public engagement process, past Telephone Town Hall events arranged by the City have proven to be an effective tool to reach up to thousands of residents at a time, keep them engaged and reiterate that the City values resident's thoughts and concerns. A Telephone Town hall event is a live event whereby a vendor, selected through the City's procurement process, calls-out to residents by phone to involve them in the budget process.

Similar to the 2016 - 2018 Telephone Town Hall events, the 2019 budget process included a call-out to 30,000 residents. The 2015 Telephone Town Hall included a call-out to 15,000 homes.

Report

On Tuesday, November 6, 2018, the City held their fifth annual, one-hour Telephone Town Hall from 7 – 8 p.m. The event was held by provider Front Porch Strategies with a call-out of up to 30,000 random households in St. Catharines to participate. The event was hosted by Budget Standing Committee Chair Mat Siscoe and Mayor Walter Sendzik with local broadcaster Tom McConnell as moderator and City staff for support.

By phone, participants were provided an opportunity to listen to information about the budget, answer four polling questions, ask live questions, as well as leave a voicemail message at the end of the Telephone Town Hall.

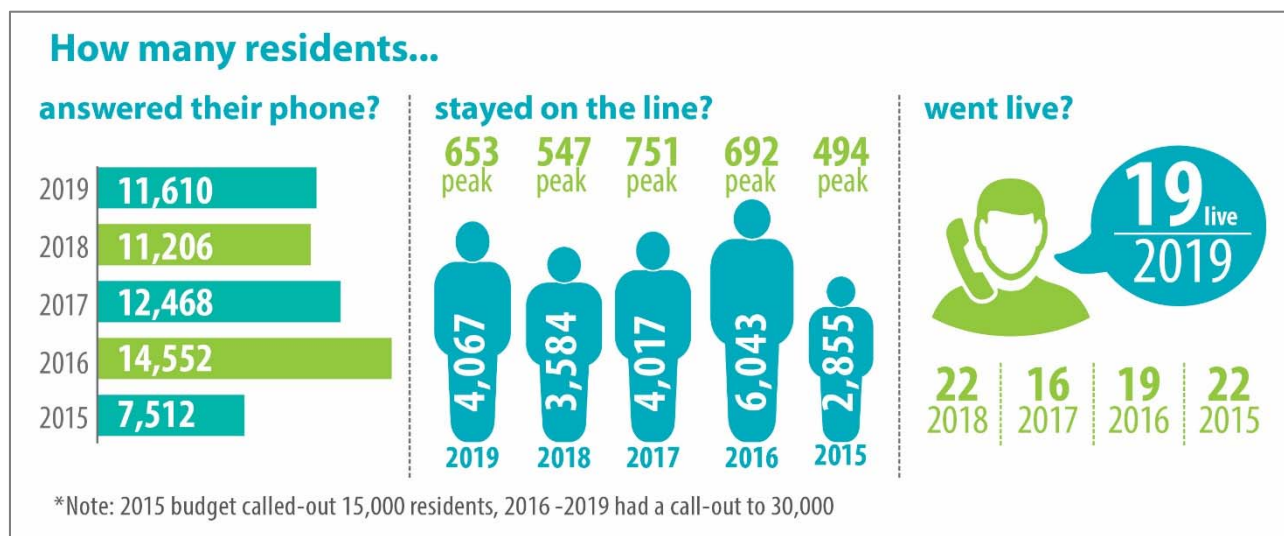
New this year, residents could also participate online with the opportunity to audio stream the event, submit questions and answer polling questions.

As an added enhancement, new and existing council members were invited to participate in this year's Telephone Town Hall by listening to the live event and have a screen project the questions residents asked and polling results in separate meeting room from the event.

Telephone Town Hall Response and Feedback

A total of 28,056 households were contacted for the Telephone Town Hall this year. Results show that 41% (11,610 households) live answered, 4,067 residents remained on the line and at peak 653 households participated.

During the Telephone Town Hall, 87 individuals entered the queue with questions, however, the allotted time only allowed for 19 to go live. The below graphic illustrates these results with prior years.



If residents didn't get the opportunity to go live during the event, a voicemail option was available to residents to leave their comments. A total of 53 voicemails were left during the event and can be found on **Appendix 1**. A small amount of questions were emailed to budget@stcatharines.ca after public budget engagement sessions. Voicemails and emails were transcribed and forwarded to appropriate departments and/or BSC members.

Many voicemails transcribed on **Appendix 1** reveal residents are pleased to be involved in the Telephone Town Hall event and felt it was beneficial.

Web Streaming

The new opportunity to audio stream through the web was utilized by 10 individuals with a total of 203 audio streamed minutes.

Polls

Four polling questions were provided to participants by phone and on-line for their input. Residents were asked the level of tax increase they would accept, their support on cannabis stores in the City, what is most important to them and/or their family, and where additional funding should be allocated if obtained.

Polling results show that between 258 – 385 participants voted. Polling results can be found on **Appendix 2** of this report with the most preferred option in bold.

Financial Implications

There are no financial considerations associated with the preparation of the Telephone Town Hall report.

Relationship to Strategic Plan

Social Sustainability is enriched by providing the Telephone Town Hall event to residents as an opportunity to involve them in the City's budget process, connecting residents with each other's thoughts, keeping open means of communication with residents, applying feedback throughout decision making and providing residents with superior customer service.

Economic Sustainability is also a factor in ensuring St. Catharines remains an affordable City for all demographics.

Conclusion

Telephone Town Hall is an effective way to reach thousands of residents at a time, keep them engaged in municipal matters and for the city to reiterate that resident's ideas and concerns are important.

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Director of Financial Management Services and City Treasurer

Attachments: Appendix 1 – Voicemail transcripts
 Appendix 2 – Poll question results

2018 Telephone Town Hall for 2019 Budget - Voicemails	
#	Comments/Question
1	Interested in hearing about everyone wanting a piece of pie. How big is this pie? Believes annual revenue is 13 million. Do we owe any money? How much do we owe? What's our service charges? Does the amount we owe grown since the last and how much do we have as a reserve as a back up? Where are things heading? Build housing for Summer games and turn into housing for the poor. Is this administration lowering or increasing our debt. Happy with Mayor Sendzik and pleased with residents being allowed to make a decision...
2	Interested in town hall, but surprised by call. Publish number of calls and make people aware of it. Looking forward to the next and would like to know when that would be.
3	Disappointed with the loss of the rink downtown on Tues/Thurs evening. Makes use of parks now with walking. Rennie park two spots where it is impassable because of the ponding with rain. Worried they will become ice ponds. Splash pads-need more in our City. Guelph has one in every park...we need more. Pier-thrilled it will be getting repaired. Wants warranties for the repairs so we are not responsible. More indoor swimming pools. Not necessarily in a City building.
4	Make use of the old hospital on Queenston
5	Homeless people in the City all over the streets and in bus shelters. Turn old hospital as a place for them to stay.
6	Concerned about the developers that will be building towers near towering heights blvd. The high rises will block the sun and condo owners will no longer be able to see sunrises/sets. Also will not allow the sun to dry moist areas. Decrease value of current condos. Greenspaces be taken into consideration moving forward.
7	new to St. Catharines coming from Vaughan. Believes this area is very scenic. Very concerned about the amount of mental illness people in the City. Feels threatened. High taxes and upset about high traffic and noise in the area of Valour way near the canal. Thought it would be quieter. Any more expansion of the roads? Asphalt to make it quieter. Concerned that there is no movement to make places look better. Parks are pathetic. Believes that the amount of taxes that is being received, the city should look like Oakville or Vaughan. Action plan to make that happen?
8	Loved being involved. Burgoyne Bridge-Too many suffering. Change that bridge to prevent suicides. More bike lanes.
9	Wants to know why the City won't shovel the sidewalk because he rents the home. He is on disability. Believes his rent pays taxes.
10	Ice dog season ticket holders-believes a walking corridor with flashing lights should be near William. Likes what is near the PAC. Warranty for 50 plus years for the Pier. Screening for bridges all over the City. More advertising for the meetings that are coming up.
11	Staffing and recruitment budget. How does it work? Do you use inside or outside agencies. Do you utilize the local workers in the area.
12	Coyotes in ravine at Westgate Park Dr. Very concerned about them living there. Is there anything that can be done? Can we move them?
13	Wondering about the surveys. Feedback for callers on the answers to the questions.
14	Concerned about the hospital and how people are being treated there. Wife has been turned down for proper care. 2 doctors have said chronic appendicitis, hospital won't assist.
15	Lived in Ancaster for 13 years. Lived here for 2 years. Loves it. How is the 8% increase going to be changes with the 2 tier Government. When he calls the City Citizens First is so helpful. Proud to be in St. Catharines. When Region is called, feels discounted. The Region is a drag for St. Catharines. How is the 3.98% increase going to affect the regions increase. Lives on Regional Rd and thinks the City should take over for services. Not the Region.
16	In terms of affordable housing, doesn't know what affordable means. Grew up in subsidized, supportive housing geared to income, affordable housing the wrong term. Parks and Rec glad to see there were talks in this area. Believes an outdoor pool should be added with hot tubs. Wants an outdoor skating rink. Maybe a basketball court that converts into a skating rink. invest in lower income areas. Louis Park? Dual use features. Sunset beach-hopes funding is being allocated...
17	General hospital-wants to know what is happening. What steps are being taken about the rats in the area. When the building is torn down, more rats in the areas.
18	Concerns about safety in the streets. 2 Street lights reported on October 3rd. Safety concern. Correspondence with Councillor Sorrento and Citizens First. Believes the time frame is too long. Paying taxes-invest in street lights
19	Asked a question to the Mayor during TTH but got cut off
20	Given demands on the budget we should be commended. Interesting that no one discussed the demo of the General Hospital.
21	Telephone town hall great idea. Great way to engage. No problems with garbage-hoping things don't change. No every other week. Still doesn't feel safe parking downtown. Won't go to events because of the problems/drugs/homeless. Needs to be looked after.
22	Just wants a call back
23	First time she has participated in something like this. Delighted to hear and participate. Happy we do this. Lived here a year and a half. Political issues she is not really aware of here. Appreciated the opportunity.
24	What is the City doing to set aside funding to attract new businesses? Utilize skilled workers in Niagara. With GM gone, what is being done.

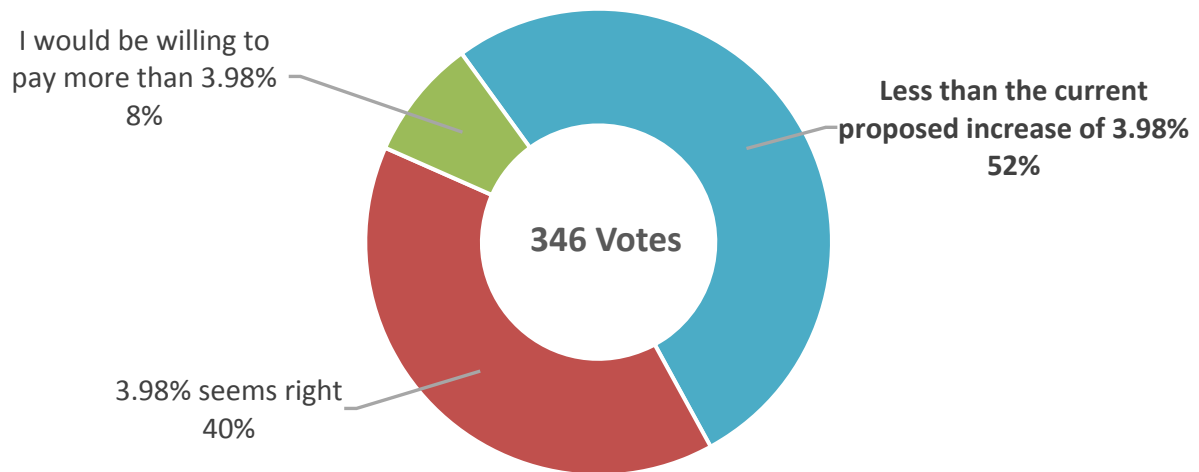
2018 Telephone Town Hall for 2019 Budget - Voicemails	
#	Comments/Question
25	Would the budget allow for a wood sign near 2 Facer St. Environmental assessment for Facer. Will it be included this year. 6 bike racks and benches on the street. Additional funding for the flower planters near garnet and Niagara
26	Thanks for the opportunity. Great job
27	South end populated with student rentals. What the City do about the landlords. Property values decreasing and Brock of no hope. What will the City do to assist with revitalizing the areas that were at one time beautiful. Now party central for students.
28	Programs for Seniors with disabilities and the assistance of snow removal. How to access?
29	Money for after hours parking. Wondering about bylaws for that and noises on Friday and Saturday nights.
30	Mental health only talked about twice. No place for those over 17 to get assistance.
31	What is happening to the old General hospital site
32	What is being done to control the increase in taxes, how do we decrease them
33	With regards to the city having a downtown square, affordable housing a priority. St Catharines is lacking in this regard. Meeting place in centre core creates spirit.
34	Any upgrades to Lancaster park? Rundown. Everything needs to be upgraded. Once was a good diamond. With Ladies softball. Great job and great City.
35	Safe injections site is a concern. Take this away form a residential area.
36	Disappointed that this was not face to face. Very disappointed about the town hall. Bridge questions never answered.
37	When is there going to be a completion at the junction of Lake, YMCA and Meadowvale?
38	Compassion into action. Lack of synchronization at Fourth Ave-Ridley Plaza. 7 Mins wait. Concern about planning with environmental pollution with regards to building permits. Permits need to include environmental components. 1128 Vansickle Rd N never cleaned up properly. 4 residents and 2 dogs ill. Put compassion into action.
39	Congrats to Mayor Sendzik. Thanking for personal response. Councillor Siscoe Thank you. Enjoyed the meeting. Wants to talk about water and sewer being doubled and the voter cards.
40	Thanks for letting her participate and enjoyed it both years. Kudos for trying to communicate. Concerned about abandoned buildings-GM and St. Catharines General. What is happening? Values of those home decreasing. What is the City's involvement. Policy put in place so City could get involved. Councillors and Mayor did a great job.
41	Who is responsible for the bus terminal bathrooms? They are a mess. Keys never given. Can Council assist? Or turn it over to the right people.
42	Thanks for the invitation. Has questions, but did not leave them
43	Voted to have a increase in projects. Will land taxes being taxed the most for allow these projects.
44	When questions are answered, get more to the point. Hydro rates need to change, should be able to do things during the day at a lower rate.
45	Mayor and Councillor answered questions beautifully.
46	Questions to ask, but nothing left.
47	We are over governed in the Niagara Region. Layers of councillors and its excessive. How does this affect tax forum? Good effort.
48	Congrats to Mayor Sendzik. Councillors are going to do great work. In 4 years we will be the best City in Canada.
49	Appreciated the opportunity. Unique situation-living near Niagara St, street has had repairs recently. Cars come off of QEW and put petal to the metal and cars travel at high speeds to Manning St. Problem coming out of driveways. Too much speeding. Have a sign that flashes or speeding means fines on Manning St.
50	Wants to find out about pro Canada and part time jobs for the disabled. Thanks for giving the opportunity.
51	See more affordable housing for seniors. 12 year wait lists. Not appropriate. Senior homes are too expensive. Doctors office at 22 Ontario St. Not enough parking. Seniors can't always park at the garage.
52	Are we seeing any funding to chronic illnesses? No resources here. Disabled people should not have to call in and complain about someone not shoveling. Maybe that person can't shovel. More assistance door the disabled.
53	Town Hall great idea. Commented on the free charging stations. Our taxes should not be going to these stations. If you can afford an electric car, you can buy a charger for home.

Polling Results

Question 1:

For the 2019 City Budget, staff have presented a draft budget with an overall expenditure increase of 3.98%. This includes funding for capital projects and other projects and reserve funding. Which of the following options do you support?

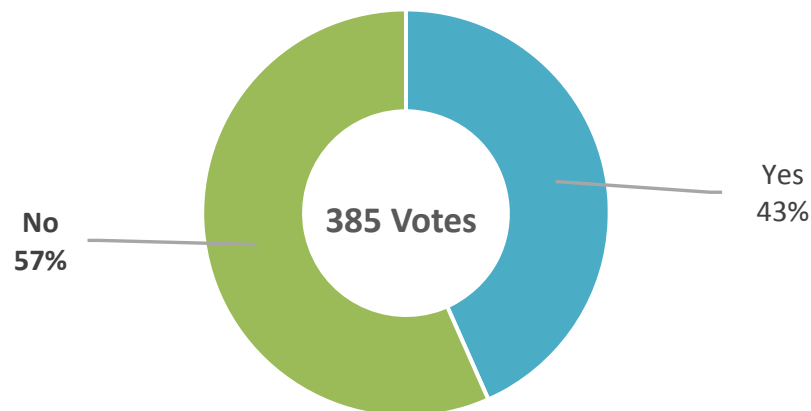
- **Less than the current proposed increase of 3.98% – 52%**
- 3.98% seems right – 40%
- I would be willing to pay more than 3.98% – 8%



Question 2:

Do you support St. Catharines having recreational cannabis stores?

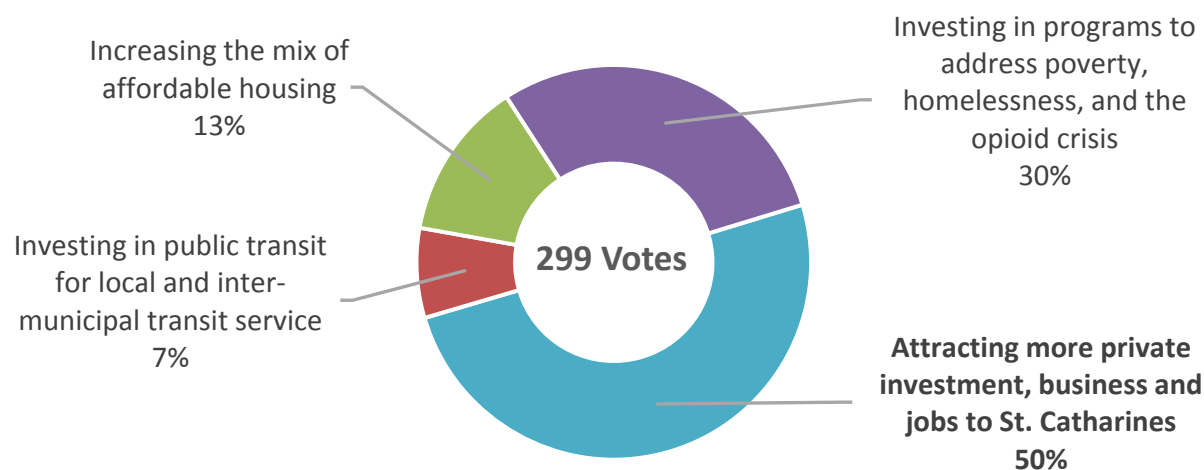
- Yes – 43%
- **No – 57%**



Question 3:

Which of the following is the most important to you and your family?

- **Attracting more private investment, business and jobs to St. Catharines – 50%**
- Investing in public transit for local and inter-municipal transit service – 7%
- Increasing the mix of affordable housing – 13%
- Investing in programs to address poverty, homelessness, and the opioid crisis – 30%



Question 4:

If the City secured additional funds for major community projects, which would you support?

- Build a Civic Square in the downtown core – 13%
- **Invest in affordable housing – 54%**
- Facilities for the Canada Summer Games in 2021 – 10%
- Investing in neighbourhood parks – 23%

