

**Report from** Financial Management Services, Director

**Date of Report:** February 1, 2019

**Date of Meeting:** March 6, 2019

**Report Number:** FMS-B003-2019

**File:** 10.57.12

**Subject:** Telephone Town Hall – Historical Polling Question Results and Approval of the 2019 Telephone Town Event Date

## Recommendation

That the Budget Standing Committee receive this report for information purposes; and

That that the Budget Standing Committee approve the 2019 Telephone Town Hall event date of Wednesday, October 23, 2019, for the 2020 budget process.

## Background

A Telephone Town hall event is a live event whereby a vendor, selected through the City's procurement process, calls-out up to 30,000 residents by phone to involve them in the budget process.

On Tuesday, November 6, 2018, the City held their fifth annual, one-hour Telephone Town Hall from 7 – 8 p.m.

For each Telephone Town Hall event held, four polling questions were provided to participants by phone and on-line for their input.

Telephone Town Hall events arranged by the City have proven to be an effective tool to reach out to thousands of residents at a time, keep them engaged and reiterate that the City values resident's thoughts and concerns. Appendix 1 briefly describes the Telephone Town Hall process in relation to the Budget Standing Committee.

## Report

### Historical Polling Questions

During the Budget Standing Committee meeting on November 28, 2018, staff was directed to provide the Budget Standing Committee with historical polling question results for trend analysis and informational purposes.

As indicated, the City has hosted five Telephone Town Hall events whereby four polling questions, per event, were provided to participating residents for their input. The polling questions and their results for all five of the Telephone Town Hall events are provided

below in Appendix 2. For year to year comparison purposes, historically there was an attempt to keep the polling questions somewhat similar.

### **2019 Telephone Town Hall Date for the 2020 Operating Budget**

As part of the 2020 Operating Budget approval process, staff is requesting the Budget Standing Committee approve the 2019 Telephone Town Hall event date of Wednesday, October 23, 2019.

Also requested at the Budget Standing Committee meeting on November 28, 2018, staff will work with the Mayor, Budget Chair and Vice-Chair to ensure consistency of questions and data set for trend analysis. The intent would be to have three questions that are similar year over year and one new question each year.

### **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**

The Telephone Town Hall event and polling questions are an effective way to keep residents engaged in municipal matters, establish trend lines and for Council and staff decisions to be guided by the values and concerns of residents.

### **Prepared by:**

Trish Sorrenti, Accounting and Budget Clerk

### **Submitted and Approved by:**

Kristine Douglas, CPA, CMA  
Director of Financial Management Services and City Treasurer

### **Attachments:**

Appendix 1 – Telephone Town Hall Process  
Appendix 2 – Historical Polling Question Results

## TELEPHONE TOWN HALL PROCESS BUDGET STANDING COMMITTEE OUTLINE

| Timeline                  | Description   |
|---------------------------|---|
| January to March          | Determine date for annual Telephone Town Hall, include in the Budget Standing Committee Work plan. Both items are brought to the first or second budget committee meeting of the year to ensure approval.   |
| June to July              | Staff will work with the Mayor, Budget Chair and Vice-Chair to develop four polling questions in order to ensure consistency of questions and data set for trend analysis. The intent would be to have three questions that are similar year over year and one new question each year.  |
| September                 | Chair or designate confirms event host, Tom McConnell.  |
| A few days prior to event | Staff provides host, Mayor, budget standing committee Chairs with script  |
| Night of event            | <p>The host, Mayor and Budget Chairs are seated in event room (St. Catharines Fire Station 4, EOC room) to answer questions from residents with the support from City Staff (CAO, Deputy CAO, Treasurer, and Finance staff)</p> <p>Remaining Budget Standing Committee members and Council are invited in advance to observe and listen to the event in a separate meeting room at Fire Station 4, which mirrors the event screen.</p> <p>Media is invited in advance to take a photo</p> |
| Two days after event      | Polling question results are emailed to members of Council.   |
| One week after event      | Voicemails and emails left by residents after the event are distributed between Mayor, Budget Chairs and Staff (according to nature of question/concern) to follow-up with residents. 2018 event experienced 53 voicemails and 5 emails.  |
| One month after event     | A final report on the telephone town hall event results, which include polling question results and participation statistics, is submitted to the Budget Standing Committee for information purposes.   |

## FMS-B003-2019 Telephone Town Hall – Historical Polling Question Results

| Telephone Town Hall Polling Results February 11, 2015   |   |   |  |   |
|---|---|---|--|---|
| Question  | Answer Voted #1   | Answer Voted #2   | Answer Voted #3  | Answer Voted #4   |
| How do you think the City should manage the budget under the current economic conditions?   | Set rate at or slightly above the rate of inflation of 2% by delaying projects & service improvements where possible. (51%) | Target a 4% tax increase that accounts for significant expenses associated Meridian Centre, Performing Arts Centre and the Aquatics Centre. (36%) | Allow for a 6% tax increase that accounts for increased expenses associated with new buildings, enhanced services and additional city infrastructure projects. (13%) |   |
| Which area, in your opinion, should be a top priority for city investments?   | Increased funding for business attraction and retention (49%)   | Improving roads and sidewalks (28%)   | Fighting the Emerald Ash Borer through tree removal and replanting. (14%)  | Improving the conditions of the city's parks, sports fields and trails (9%) |
| Which of the following is the most important to you and/or your family?   | Bringing more private investment and business to St. Catharines (40%)   | Keeping the overall budget increase at 2%. (26%)  | Establishing daily GO Train commuter services to St. Catharines. (25%)   | Increasing the number of services provided by the city (9%)                 |
| City Council is about to embark on a strategic planning session that will guide the city for the next 4 – 7 years. What do you think is the number one priority for the City? | Redeveloping vacant industrial, commercial and residential lands in the city. (34%)   | Retaining and attracting young people to live and work in the community. (29%)  | Increasing the number of private sector businesses in city. (28%)  | Increasing residential living in downtown St. Catharines (9%)               |
| Telephone Town Hall Polling Results January 18, 2016  |   |   |  |   |
| Question  | Answer Voted #1   | Answer Voted #2   | Answer Voted #3  | Answer Voted #4   |
| With the City's financial challenges in mind, which of the following options would you support?   | Support a tax increase under 3% (51%)   | Support a tax increase between 3% to 6% (36%)   | Support a tax increase above 6% (13%)  |   |
| In the event of the City approving an above average 3% tax increase, what should be the top priority for City investments?  | Investment in business attraction and retention (49%)   | Replacement and maintenance of roads and sidewalk (35%)   | Improve community parks, sports fields and arenas (9%)   | Investment in creative and cultural sector (7%)                             |
| Which of the following is important to you and/or your family?  | Attracting more private investment, business & jobs (61%)   | Enhancing our public transit system (25%)   | Preparing infrastructure for climate change (8%)   | Investing in improved customer service (6%)                                 |
| If the City were to secure federal/provincial funding, what project would you consider to be a priority?  | To offset the funding gap for municipal infrastructure (42%)  | The Port Dalhousie Piers and waterfront improvements (31%)  | More investment in public transit (24%)  | Arenas - including replacement of the Jack Gatecliff and the Rex (3%)       |

## FMS-B003-2019 Telephone Town Hall – Historical Polling Question Results

**Telephone Town Hall Polling Results January 11, 2017**

| Question  | Answer Voted #1   | Answer Voted #2  | Answer Voted #3   | Answer Voted #4                                     |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| <b>The Budget Standing Committee set an overall expenditure target of 2% for 2017. As part of an overall property tax increase, which option would you support?</b>   | 2% with modest improvements (54%)                                   | 0% with possible cuts (35%)                              | 4% to cover additional expenses, allow for investment (11%) |   |
| <b>In working with the Federal and Provincial government, infrastructure funding has been identified as a priority. What should the City focus on for investment?</b> | Maintenance/replacement of infrastructure (48%)                     | Funding/investment in poverty reduction projects (28%)   | Improving Parks and Recreation facilities (12%)             | Increased support for public transportation (12%)   |
| <b>Which of the following is most important to you and/or your family?</b>  | Attracting more private investment/jobs (62%)                       | Ensuring healthy mix of affordable housing options (18%) | Enhancing public transit system (16%)                       | Creating additional space for arts and culture (4%) |
| <b>If the City secured additional funds to accomplish one major initiative, which would you support?</b>  | Invest in City-owned greenhouses to support community gardens (36%) | Establish new library/community centre (29%)             | Build a civic square downtown (23%)                         | Build free WiFi network throughout downtown (12%)   |

**Telephone Town Hall Polling Results October 25, 2017**

| Question  | Answer Voted #1   | Answer Voted #2   | Answer Voted #3   | Answer Voted #4                                |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| <b>For the 2018 City Budget, staff have presented a budget with an overall expenditure increase of 2.77%. As part of an overall property tax rate, which of the following options do you support?</b> | Less than the current proposed increase of 2.77% (55%)                        | 2.77% seems right (35%)   | I would be willing to pay more than 2.77% (10%)   |  |
| <b>With the province's minimum wage increase escalating the City's budget by more than \$400,000, do you support?</b>   | Raising taxes to maintain part-time student staff and services (50%)          | Reducing part-time student staff and cutting services (33%)                 | Cutting services to fund part-time student staff (17%)  |  |
| <b>Which of the following is the most important to you and your family?</b>   | Attracting more private investment, business and jobs to St. Catharines (51%) | Investing in programs and services to reduce poverty and homelessness (23%) | Enhancing public transit to better connect Niagara communities through inter- municipal transit service (16%) | Increasing the mix of affordable housing (10%) |
| <b>If the City secured additional funds for major community initiatives, which would you support?</b>   | Invest in affordable housing /the Housing Action Plan (54%)                   | Build a Civic Square in the downtown core (25%)                             | Build a new "destination" pool (14%)  | Create a new public art gallery (7%)           |

| Telephone Town Hall Polling Results November 6, 2018  |   |   |   |  |
|---|---|---|---|--|
| Question  | Answer Voted #1   | Answer Voted #2   | Answer Voted #3                                 | Answer Voted #4  |
| <b>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?</b> | 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%)  |  |
| <b>Do you support St. Catharines having recreational cannabis stores?</b>   | No (57%)  | Yes (43%)   |   |  |
| <b>Which of the following is the most important to you and your family?</b>   | Attracting more private investment, business and jobs to St. Catharines (50%) | Investing in public transit for local and inter-municipal transit service (30%) | Increasing the mix of affordable housing (13%)  | Investing in programs to address poverty, homelessness, and the opioid crisis (7%) |
| <b>If the City secured additional funds for major community projects, which would you support?</b>  | Invest in affordable housing (54%)  | Investing in neighbourhood parks (23%)  | Build a Civic Square in the downtown core (13%) | Facilities for the Canada Summer Games in 2021 (10%)                               |