

**Report from** Office of the Chief Administrative Officer, Corporate Communications

**Date of Report:** Sept. 3, 2019

**Date of Meeting:** Sept. 16, 2019

**Report Number:** CAO-B029-2019

**File:** 10.4.99

**Subject:** Public Engagement Opportunities

## Recommendation

That report CAO-B029-2019, re: Public Engagement Opportunities be received by the Budget Standing Committee for information.

## Background

In the past, the City has used a number of tools to engage the public, including open houses which typically see limited attendance, an online citizens' budget with a sliding scale that didn't adequately meet the City's needs for engagement, to now offering a Telephone Town Hall and continuing to host open houses for budget engagement. These public engagement activities are typically held when a draft budget has been prepared and tabled.

## Report

Since establishing the Budget Standing Committee in 2015, the budget is a year-round discussion with regularly scheduled public meetings. Those meetings are on livestream and notification does go out on the City social media channels of upcoming meetings and when a meeting is about to start.

With regular budget meetings, it does present a potential opportunity to get the public engaged throughout the year, increase awareness, and further educate the public.

Over the last year, Communications has focused its attention on additional opportunities and tools to enhance public engagement as a whole. This focus led to the creation of the City's engagement platform [EngageSTC](#). A number of cities use engagement platforms including area municipalities: Welland, Thorold, Niagara Falls, and Niagara-on-the-Lake.

Since its soft launch in late December 2018, the engagement platform has been quite successful with 11,900 visits over the last nine months. Analysis shows that 8,678 of those visits are people viewing at least one project page and staff has seen a record of 863 visitors in one day. Top projects in terms of aware visitors (meaning they clicked on links and viewed page content) are the arena strategy (3,182) and the private property tree by-law (2,326).

# EngagementHQ Tools Spectrum

Managing your project communications



As indicated in the image above, the [EngageSTC](#) platform provides a number of tools for public engagement including full surveys, quick polls, questions and answers, a guest book, places that allows sharing feedback on a map, ideas, and discussion forums. When establishing a project page, Communications works with the departments to determine the best tool for the project.

With respect to the budget and the Budget Standing Committee, Communications has teamed up with Financial Management Services to establish a budget project page on the platform. It will be live on Sept. 25 and used throughout the year.

A communications plan for the budget, that will include public engagement, will be finalized prior to the launch of the project page. It will further outline tactics and tools to encourage the public's earlier involvement in the budget process, as well as better educate the public of the Budget Standing Committee throughout the year.

For the months of October and November, the City will engage the public in the budget process through social media and encourage them to learn more at [EngageSTC](#) once the project page is live.

Along with the engagement tools available on the platform, the project pages also allow an opportunity for videos, a library of documents (FAQs, Council reports, budget reports), news feed, links to our website, key dates and project timeline. People who register can also sign up to receive regular updates on the projects of interest.

The engagement platform also has a participatory budget feature recently added to its tools. As it is included in the City's engagement platform licence, there are no additional fees associated with the tool should it become part of the engagement process.

As the City continues to increase its efforts to engage the public, Communications will be developing an overall public engagement strategy. The division also finalized a social media strategy, which includes plans to better make use of online channels. Some of the actions identified have already been implemented.

The social media strategy led to the launch of a Corporate Instagram account, the addition of more dynamic and varied social media content, as well as better use of the existing LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter accounts. Currently, on social media the City does promote the livestream of Budget Standing Committee meetings. Budget meetings are also now promoted in the City's e-newsletter, as are highlights from the meetings.

More social media messaging has the potential to reach a wider audience in our community and encourage more engagement. The City has well-established social media following and continues to see growth. Here are the number of followers:

- Facebook: 11,532
- Twitter: 18,129 (averaging nearly 100 new followers a month in 2019)
- Instagram: 1,502 (since launching March 28)
- Garden City Current e-newsletter: 2,186 (subscribers)
- Ping Street: 2,770 (subscribers to notifications)
- LinkedIn: 4,484 (1,749 new followers over the last 12 months)

## **Financial Implications**

Increasing public engagement opportunities and outreach can be accommodated with current staff resources, however, anything beyond what [EngageSTC](#) and staff can do could have budget implications. There are no financial implications related to receiving this report for information.

## **Relationship to Strategic Plan**

### **Economic Sustainability Pillar:**

Be an affordable city for all.

### **Social Sustainability Pillar:**

Strive for the highest quality of life for all citizens.

Provide excellent customer service and communication with citizens.

## **Conclusion**

Staff will continue to work collaboratively to finalize a communications plan which includes public engagement earlier in the process, launch a budget project page on the

City's engagement platform [EngageSTC](#), and enhance social media messaging around the City's budget, committee meetings, and financial management plans.

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