

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

**Date of Report:** October 28, 2019

**Date of Meeting:** November 13, 2019

**Report Number:** CAO-B051-2019

**File:** 10.57.10

**Subject:** Capital Budget 2020 - Website Upgrade Project

## Recommendation

That the 2020 capital budget be amended to include the website upgrade project as recommended in report FMS-B026-2019, Capital Budget, Four Year Forecast and Asset Management Status Update.

## Summary

Proceeding with the website upgrade project in 2020 will allow staff to meet accessibility requirements by January 1, 2021, offer more online services and develop a more engaging site for citizens. For the website upgrade project to be completed efficiently and in a timely fashion, a single consultant for all phases of the project is recommended. Separating the project between the audit of the website and the design, integrations, and additional online services would duplicate efforts, delay the process and create challenges in determining the most appropriate solutions as that would be dependent on the company hired.

## Background

On October 7, 2019, Council approved the 2020 Capital Budget and referred consideration of funding for the website (Schedule P) until staff provided more information about the project. Appendix 1 includes the funding request (Schedule P) along with information about the breakdown of the funding mechanism.

A municipal website is a vital asset in customer service and program delivery. Since the original site was launched in 2005 with eSolutions, there has been no major upgrade to the website. In fact, minor updates were completed in 2014 as a means to meet new legislated accessibility standards.

Since 2005, user behaviour and expectations of websites has dramatically changed, as has the technology.

Users no longer sit and read websites like an old, dusty encyclopedia. Instead, people want to find information quickly and easily. They also want to be able to access more services and programs online in a way that is engaging, user-friendly, accessible, and secure.

Municipalities, unlike businesses, have so many different services and programs that add to the complexity of the website – people want to register for swimming; live chat

with customer service; pay taxes, water bills and parking tickets online; submit by-law complaints; see a live map with the location of snowplows and street sweepers; and apply for marriage licences and building permits online, as examples.

More online capabilities enhance customer service, streamlines processes at the City and make services and programs more accessible. While residents expect to be able to do more business online, those tools come with a cost.

## **Report**

The website is a critical access point to municipal government information, programs and services.

Municipal websites are now the new customer service window where citizens come to get service from and interact with their municipality. A website should provide a very high level of accessibility – as it can be accessed from anywhere at any time, regardless of user location or level of mobility, as long as Internet access is available.

If a citizen is out of the country, does not have a car, has limited mobility or is seeking service outside of business hours, service should be available to them through the website. It means less phone calls and visits to our Citizens First counter and the ability to do more self-serve actions by the citizens and business community.

By presenting relevant, important, timely information on the website, the City enhances its transparency. Also, by making information easily available and providing opportunities for input, the City promotes citizen engagement.

When a website, however, has accessibility challenges, is difficult to navigate, doesn't allow for two-way interaction – it limits the City's ability to customer service during normal business hours, by phone or in person.

The current website does not function as a customer service window nor does it create opportunities for inclusivity.

Despite its limitations, in the last 12 months (Nov. 3, 2018 to Nov. 3, 2019) the website has seen a lot of page views - 1,819,377 and 980,928 times the users were engaged with the website. In the last year, the website saw 576,193 users, most of which were "new" or first-time users.

The majority of the users, 53 per cent visit the website on mobile devices, 38 per cent on desktop and 8.3 per cent on a tablet.

For perspective, the top pages visited by users include: home page, employment opportunities, swim schedule, municipal contacts, GO Transit, St. Catharines Museum and Welland Canal Centre, online parking ticket payments, parking lots / garages,

public skating, find a family doctor, property taxes, Leisure Guide, and eServices. Other website visits that stand out in the top 50 include the following:

- Bills / meter readings
- Parking by-law
- Zoning
- Construction map
- Building permits
- Water / wastewater
- Event and meeting calendar

The City's website requires upgrading and any minor edits or simple add-on tools that don't work cohesively with the site and/or City software will cost more money in the long run and hamper the City's ability to do more business online. The goals of the website redesign are to:

- Create a new user journey based on qualitative and quantitative data;
- Create new content and shape design around it;
- Introduce changes to improve customer experience, convenience, and accessibility.

In order for the City to achieve those goals, the website upgrade project involves more than just changing the look and feel of the site. It will involve:

- Review of current content (City's website is about 1,100 pages);
- Consultation and needs assessment with departments, the public, and the City's accessibility advisory committee;
- Review of our web traffic history and analysis of what information people are seeking most often;
- Design and redevelopment of the website;
- Integration of the platforms and portals used currently by departments;
- Addition of tools to create opportunities for more online service delivery;
- Writing and photographing new web content;
- Testing of the website before going live;
- Development of a communications campaign / official site launch;
- Launch of the official new site;
- Determination of how best to manage the website moving forward.

## **Consultation**

While the website project is the main priority of and managed by the Corporate Communications division, the City's Information Technology division is partnering with Communications to ensure the best outcome. A project team has been established to assist with this major project.

An important component of the website upgrade is consultation. There are three main areas the project team will focus on for consultation: the public, staff and the City's Accessibility Advisory Committee. The accessibility committee, in particular, has already identified challenges with the current website and it is the project committee's hope that more accessible sites can be identified and those tools / features can be added to the City's website.

With respect to consultation, the Communications division recently launched a communications survey as a project identified in the division's work plan, to evaluate how the public prefers to get information, if they feel engaged, the type of information they are seeking, and how they prefer to interact with the City.

Some of the feedback from the communications survey relates specifically to the website. As well, an internal survey has been launched by Communications to garner feedback from staff.

### **Community Survey – Early Indications**

While still in the midst of the survey, early results of the community survey have indicated:

- 82.9 per cent of respondents prefer to connect with the City online
- 52 per cent of respondents prefer to receive information via the website

When asked about their first impression of the website, the most common response was that the site is busy, no hierarchy in design and users are not sure what to look at first; it's not easy to follow, confusing to navigate, difficult to find things, outdated visually, and informational.

With respect to what people are looking for and/or used on the site, the most common answers were: searching for information, community events, leisure guide and recreation programs, eServices, and the careers page.

When residents were asked what they would like to see on the site, these are some of the suggestions thus far:

- Easier search
- Tax and water bills online
- Info about the library or link to their site
- Submit a suggestion function
- Easier menu bar to navigate
- A more user friendly interface
- A website dedicated to the Leisure Guide
- More info on upcoming events
- A cleaner look

## **Internal survey – Early Indications**

For the internal survey, staff have been providing some feedback about the website. Some of the comments are included below:

- People want online services enhanced (payment system)
- Search function not great
- Departments need to work with Communications to ensure pages are updated
- Construction map is time intensive and tedious – look at alternatives to offer same service
- Website is dated or “antiquated”
- Too many pages
- Needs to be easier to navigate and cleaner
- Better integration with social media channels required
- Ability for online chat with residents
- Improvements required to make it easier to find information on the departments
- Introduce option to track work orders
- More user-friendly facility bookings
- Website lacks visual appeal
- Give residents a single login where they can track issues, pay bills, register for programs etc.

The City will continue to survey the public and staff for the month of November and hope to have additional feedback for future reports.

## **Accessibility**

As of January 1, 2014, public websites must meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.0 Level A. Beginning January 1, 2021, all public websites must meet WCAG 2.0 Level AA (the second of three phases of accessibility requirements for websites).

WCAG 2.0 is an internationally accepted standard for web accessibility developed by the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), an international team of experts.

The City’s current website is at the compliance standards of January 1, 2014. It does not and will not meet the required accessibility standards for January 1, 2021 without a significant upgrade.

To fully determine where the site is currently with respect to accessibility, Siteimprove conducted an audit of the City’s website. The audit discovered 14,854 instances of 61 accessibility issues on the site (which has nearly 1,100 pages). Some of those accessibility issues are beyond Communications’ ability to address simply as a result of the age of the website and requires design and functionality improvements.

Specifically, a member of the City’s Accessibility Advisory Committee has also raised concerns with the accessibility of our site. One of those concerns is with respect to an

accessibility feature on the website, a page reader, that cannot read the information in a way that would make sense to the customer, especially if the individual is visually impaired or blind, which is a direct result of the design of the current site.

Not only is the City required to meet new website accessibility standards in 2021, it is the hope the City can exceed minimum standards to continue to demonstrate leadership in the area of accessibility and inclusivity.

## Integrations

Integrations allow the City website to directly connect with software being used by the municipality. Integrations do add costs to the overall project, however, the benefits to the Corporation are many.

Integrations streamlines processes, create more efficiencies in how the City conducts its business, reduces duplication, and more importantly, improves customer service.

Just a few examples of the primary applications used by the City (not an exhaustive list):

- **CSDC, Amanda 7:** Used for tracking all of the jurisdictions' activities relating to property and people. It is used by the following areas – By-law and Licensing, Building Services, Planning, Engineering and Fire.
- **Active Network, CLASS 8.0 (under review):** Used for recreation services including activity management, customer service, facility reservation, facility search and management, facility reports, membership and pass management, payment processing (including Point of Sale machines and online payment), marketing and reporting, touch-tone registration.
- **Gallery Systems, The Museum System:** Museum collection management software, handling every facet of collections both large and small from objects and exhibitions to insurance policies.
- **Vailtech (under review):** Full suite of integrated financial applications for activities such as tax billing, water and sewer billing, and general ledger, budgets, accounts payable and receivable.
- **Precise Park Link, Zeag:** Used to optimize parking space, manage the influx of cars and ensure the safety of people and cars. Parking management software helps the City control access to parking locations, manage types of fees and process payments.
- **Stone Orchard:** Efficiently track our cemetery inventory, respond to the genealogical inquires, and automate all of our business processes including plot reservation and purchases as well as all of the activities that take place in our cemetery.
- **Ticket Tracer:** Application that tracks, modifies and maintains parking tickets.
- **Oracle Spatial + Autodesk Map Guide:** Backend and frontend software for the City's GIS systems.

- **Taleo:** used by Human Resources and management for the purpose of job postings, recruitment, tracking, and hiring employees.

IT and Communications will be able to identify the required integrations and ensure that the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system and website work in tandem, as well as provide the tools and features that meet public expectations and the City's needs. Without an updated website, there could be challenges for integrating the new CRM system to the City's current website. IT has also identified other features such as an FTP site and API integration that should be added to the website upgrade project.

For perspective, depending on the complexity, one single integration can add an additional \$5,000 to \$10,000 to the website upgrade project. A tool, such as a live online chat with Citizens First is an estimated \$8,000 with annual fees.

Examples of upgraded websites:

Brantford: [www.brantford.ca](http://www.brantford.ca)

Peterborough: [www.peterborough.ca](http://www.peterborough.ca)

Ajax: [www.ajax.ca](http://www.ajax.ca)

Burlington: [www.burlington.ca](http://www.burlington.ca)

Sudbury: <https://www.greatersudbury.ca/>

Greater Napanee: [www.greaternapanee.com](http://www.greaternapanee.com)

Saugeen Shores: [www.saugeenshores.ca](http://www.saugeenshores.ca)

City of Cambridge: [www.cambridge.ca](http://www.cambridge.ca)

Kitchener: [www.kitchener.ca](http://www.kitchener.ca)

## Financial Implications

The capital request for \$400,000 is the upper limit and would allow for additional integrations, enhanced functionality and added tools to increase the availability of online services in a more accessible manner. The starting point for the website, with no additional integrations or online tools, is an estimated \$200,000 with the audit.

The estimated cost of the project was determined through consultation with Communications and IT, preliminary discussions with the current provider, review of the costs incurred by other municipalities that recently updated their websites, and consideration of the integrations and online tools.

## Relationship to Strategic Plan

While not directly related to any specific goals within the Strategic Plan, this project does support the plan's vision for St. Catharines to be the most dynamic, innovative, sustainable and livable City in North America.

It also follows the guiding principles within it which states:

Our City will continue to achieve success through strategic decision-making that:

- Embraces innovation, ensures sustainability and improves livability for all residents
- Promotes operational and service excellence
- Demonstrates accountability and transparency
- Respects diversity, inclusiveness and equity
- Enables people to achieve success

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**Appendices:**

Appendix 1: 2020 Capital Budget – Schedule P

2020 CAPITAL BUDGET  
CORPORATE INFRASTRUCTURE (SCHEDULE P)

| Project No.         | Project Type | Project Name                | Gross Cost               | Details  |
|---------------------|--------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|--|
| <b>New Projects</b> |              |                             |                          |  |
| PCI20-01            | SI           | Website redesign and update | \$ 400,000               | Update the City's website to meet users' expectations for content, and meet accessibility and other regulatory notification requirements |
|                     |              |                             | <b><u>\$ 400,000</u></b> |  |

Funding:

Capital out of Revenue \$ 40,000

Debt \$360,000

Total \$400,000

Project Type:

R = Renewal, SI = Service Improvement, G = Growth

City of St. Catharines 2020 Capital Budget and 2021-24 Forecast