2016 COMMUNITY EXCELLENCE AWARDS APPLICATION   BEST PRACTICES, Community Connections

Filled Thursday, June 16, 2016

Name of Local Government

The City of Abbotsford

Project/Program Manager Name

Siri Bertelsen

Title

General Manager, Planning & Development Services

Phone

604-864-5507

Email

sbertelsen@abbotsford.ca

Administrative Contact Name

Rachel McAvoy

Title

Executive Coordinator, City Manager's Office

Phone

604-864-5584

Email

rmcavoy@abbotsford.ca

The Mayor/Chair is aware that I am submitting this application on behalf of my local government.

Yes

Project/Program Title:

Abbotsforward (Official Community Plan Update)

Project Summary Paragraph

Please provide a summary of your project/program in 150 words or less.

Abbotsforward was an innovative project to create a new Official Community Plan (OCP) for the City of Abbotsford through far-reaching community engagement, extensive technical scrutiny and bold policy-making. A collaboration between the City of Abbotsford and its consultants, Dialog and Toderian UrbanWorks, the OCP is intended to be a powerful catalyst for a different and better Abbotsford at 200,000 people and beyond, than it has been up to today. The OCP shapes how the community will look, feel, and work, and powerfully influences day-to-day experiences and quality of life for people in Abbotsford. The process of creating the new OCP through the Abbotsforward project brought the community, City Council and City staff together in a deliberate exercise in culture change and capacity-building to address the challenging circumstances of growth in Abbotsford and implement a transformative future vision. This plan will, and indeed already has, profoundly changed our community.

Project Analysis

1. INSPIRATION

What was the inspiration behind the program/project?

OCPs by their nature contain visions and images of vibrant communities. Policy statements talk of prosperity, walkability, and health in OCPs across Canada. They talk of compactness, completeness, connectedness, sustainability, efficiency, and distinctiveness of place. Yet many cities struggle to achieve the outcomes these

plans envision; there is often a disconnect between what residents aspire to, what an OCP projects, and what is seen on the ground. This situation has, historically, been the case in Abbotsford.

City planning in Abbotsford has never had a very high profile within the community. This situation has led to apathy, or to frustration for residents who have difficulty accepting planning decisions. Residents simply haven't been given a strong enough voice in the direction of future growth, and the resulting development of their neighbourhoods.

Abbotsford's sprawling urban area, which is largely the result of two municipal amalgamations, has contributed to the lack of a true city centre that could be shared by all residents. While the city boasts several historic centres, including a charming and vibrant Historic Downtown, it has become clear that quality public spaces, walkable streets and more complete neighbourhoods are desired features throughout the city.

Two years ago, an initiative entitled Abbotsforward was inspired by the belief that if city planners enthusiastically engaged with residents using unconventional methods, these challenges could be overcome and a vision for a better Abbotsford could be developed, and the culture around city planning both within and outside city hall could be powerfully changed.

2. GOALS

What did you set out to accomplish with the program/project? How effective were you in meeting your goals?

At the very beginning, seven guiding principles were established to help frame the project. Abbotsforward set out to:

• Undertake a robust community engagement process,

• Understand the current land use inventory and future trends,

• Align City plans and strategies with the OCP,

• Clarify and add detail to the City's land use designations,

• Integrate the OCP with servicing capacity and strategies,

• Establish infill and redevelopment guidelines, and

• Create a framework for neighbourhood planning.

Abbotsforward has met and indeed exceeded our initial expectations for each of these. But above all else, Abbotsforward sought to energetically and creatively re-

connect with residents, and build a new understanding of the importance of city planning to their daily lives. At the same time, Abbotsforward wanted to change the culture at City Hall where departments often worked in isolation of one another. This was achieved with significant success by building honest conversations with residents and staff, establishing a new vision that reflected the desires of the community, and tying everything to rigorous technical analysis and by creating a real buzz and excitement about the plan across the community.

3. STRATEGY

Discuss the role of social media and civic engagement in your local government's overall communications strategy.

Never has City Hall engaged with so many residents and stakeholders in a way that fostered such rich conversations about Abbotsford's future. These conversations were intended to inform, engage, and inspire, and they made significant and tangible contributions to the Plan. As a result, residents and stakeholders have had a very real impact on the OCP.

Abbotsforward's use of social media extended to Twitter and Facebook in unprecedented ways. These platforms were used for the first time by the City's planners and thanks to bold strategic thinking about how they could foster a powerful new conversation and awareness, exceeded expectations. They generated an impressive amount of interest and chatter online and their use has been lauded extensively both inside and outside the city. Much of the popularity was due to plain language, engaging infographics, maps and illustrations, all framing what urban planning is and how Abbotsforward impacts everyone.

Over Facebook, advertising campaigns were designed with intentionally provocative ideas from fictional characters envisioning 'making South Fraser Way pedestrian-only' or 'building skyscrapers on the shores of Mill Lake'. These edgy campaigns, with a call to action to 'tell us your idea' helped motivate users to get involved. Subsequently residents were brought to our online survey that asked detailed questions about Abbotsford's future. To supplement the online engagement, staff also organized road show events, neighbourhood walks and pop-up activities throughout the city. It was invaluable to make face-to-face connections with the community and show planners are genuinely interested in hearing from residents.

4. PARTICIPATION

a. How has this program/project increased community connections? Please provide measurable results.

Early on, we concluded that using unconventional methods to reach out to community members is more likely to catch people's attention and draw larger numbers into the conversation. In traditional open house formats, the City would typically attract the same few dozen people who have the time and ability to attend. The biggest factor to Abbotsforward's success in connecting with the community was the conscious decision to only hold engagement events in places where people already gather and at times that would likely be busy.

Before the project began, the Abbotsforward team created an Engagement Strategy that included metrics as objectives for each type of engagement activity. Each objective was arrived at through consultation with the City's Communications team as ambitious but realistic targets. The majority of these targets were not only achieved, but surpassed by large margins. Listed below are two prime examples:

• Road show booths - Goal: 1,500 contacts, Result: 3,100+

• Public open houses - Goal: 100 contacts, Result: 1,150+

Abbotsforward's road show booths were located in shopping centres, places of worship, recreation centres, libraries and present at festivals and concerts. One open house was held in an empty storefront in the Abbotsford's historic downtown and another was a Popup Park in the Sevenoaks Shopping Centre parking lot. At each event 'Planners in Pink' were highly visible in bright pink Abbotsforward t-shirts and were made available to chat with anyone present. These unique approaches helped exceed our total target of 5,000 contacts with people, to over 7,750 contacts!

b. Demonstrate through analytics or other data, how your local government's use of social media has supported dialogue between your local government and its citizens, community and business stakeholders.

Also included in the Engagement Strategy mentioned above, were targets for social media interactions. The following are examples of how Abbotsforward once again surpassed many of its own expectations, which ultimately lead to more diverse voices being heard, and more people being informed on the project:

• Twitter - Goal: 800 followers, Result: 1,300+

• Project Videos - Goal: 1,000 views, Result: 3,000+

• Online Survey - Goal: 2,000 completed surveys, Result: 3,500+

Perhaps one of the biggest surprises was the number of website hits Abbotsforward achieved. An initial goal of 300 visits per month was established. While this goal was achieved in the early months of the process, later on as Facebook and Twitter

campaigns ramped up during engagement stages, visits to our website exploded, more than tripling expectations. Since 2016, the website regularly hits over 1,000 unique visits and since the draft OCP has been made public, up to 1,600 and 2,000 visits have been recorded for April and May respectively. This can be attributed to a thoughtful and creative social media strategy. In addition, the plan generated significantly more mainstream media and blog attention than other exercises usually do, not just locally, but across the province.

5. ECONOMIC IMPACT

How has the program/project saved the community money and/or resources or encouraged economic development?

In Abbotsforward's third stage, three ways for the city to grow were developed. A city centre, neighbourhood centre, and status quo scenario underwent rigorous analysis to better understand associated infrastructure costs. A major reason for undertaking this study was to reveal the difference between more compact forms of urban development versus more sprawling ones. The study discovered $100 million in capital cost variation between the city centre and status quo options.

Making decisions on how the city grows today will have a direct impact on the City's finances tomorrow. Abbotsford now better understands how much growth costs and can make smarter decisions about its ability to finance that growth.

Moreover, clearer density provisions in the land use designations, more concise development permit guidelines, and detailed direction for infill and redevelopment projects, will all provide a more certain environment for investors, builders and residents. While in the past guidance on land use and density was lacking, the new OCP has clearer regulation that will entice development in certain areas and protect the interests of neighbourhoods at the same time.

For example, maximum and minimum Floor Space Ratios have been added to many land use designations. Previously, within the City Centre area, anything could be built from a single storey commercial building to a 30 storey residential building. Now and in the future, knowing that your neighbour will be required to develop in a similar way not only helps create a more cohesive neighbourhood, but also removes risk from large investments.

6. INNOVATION

What makes this program/project innovative and creative?

Part of what sets Abbotsforward apart is a focus on outcomes rather than timeframes. As mentioned above, most communities use a timeline to project the future with residents. But having a tangible number to plan for - the 200,000 population target, not as a final population but as a benchmark in the city's evolution - helped residents better envision the future and allowed city staff to study all the servicing requirements to accommodate population increases.

Apart from this, the branding of the project was seen as being very important. A clever name "Abbotsforward" was developed to create buzz and a colourful graphic identity that distinguishes itself from the typical City of Abbotsford brand was created to catch people's attention.

Finally, much of the actual land use policy is also groundbreaking and, we believe, could represent a new best practice model for cities of Abbotsford's vintage and size. Just one small example of this is the creative guidelines on how to address infill and redevelopment in existing neighbourhoods. Property owners within the "Urban 3 - Infill" land use designation - which covers many older neighbourhoods surrounding Abbotsford's core - will now have a wide range of options to add value to their properties. From basement suites and granny flats to duplexes and small lot subdivisions, the opportunities for 'do-it-yourself' development are greatly enhanced. This increase in density where infrastructure already exists is a kind of smart and sustainable growth, which also contributes to a more diverse range of affordable housing options.

7. CHALLENGES

What kind of challenges did you face in the implementation and operation of your project/program? Describe your creative solutions for overcoming those challenges.

When staff began tweeting, there was an initial fear and apprehension about inadvertently inviting significant public criticism, poorly communicating complex ideas, and it becoming a very time consuming, inefficient method to reach out to residents. A framework for which kind of accounts would be followed back and what would be acceptable to retweet and favourite was thought through. And a process was also created to ensure Twitter mentions and Facebook comments could be recorded and considered as engagement input.

At first, most tweets were very carefully worded and reviewed by multiple staff members. A regular schedule of tweets was established to ensure a consistent stream of information types, rotation between newspaper articles, infographics and event dates. But this was a rather onerous process and as the planners felt more

comfortable with the program, it became clear that a more flexible approach, with fewer layers of oversight would allow for a more dynamic twitter feed that could react and engage more effectively. What has resulted is a true case of culture change within City Hall, not just around social media, but around risk-aversion. Now, four planners have access to the Abbotsforward account and each can post tweets at any time about the project. The use of Tweetdeck, a third party application, has also helped monitor activity on the account, schedule tweets for evenings and weekends, keep track of questions and comments, and more.

8. BEST PRACTICES

What sets your local government apart from others in your implementation and use of community connection tools?

Each time staff were out engaging with the public, useful data helped frame and foster discussions. Community connections were created in a way that understood context. Engaging infographics and concrete data, pushed through various channels including but not limited to social media, helped inform residents and stakeholders while also creating a foundation on which rich consultation could be had.

As previously mentioned, a staff study discovered a $100 million variation between different growth options. This kind of information is invaluable for residents in making informed choices about the kind of tradeoffs growth and development present. As cities look to better manage their financial resources in the construction and maintenance of infrastructure, these kinds of planning exercises are becoming increasingly important, if not necessary for achieving public buy-in.

9. TRANSFERABILITY

How is this program/project transferable to other local governments?

From the beginning, Abbotsforward set out to be game-changing not only for this city, but for similar cities that could learn from our experiences and experiments, in engagement, social media, plan-making and culture-change. Already, many other Canadian cities have been taking notice of our process, and discussing it as a model to learn from.

Any local government can hold more creative, fun and honest discussions with its residents and development community. Whether it's about the cost of growth, current day conditions and challenges, or the required changes for achieving important objectives, this information is incredibly important in making decisions about the future. The public should be actively engaged with these considerations.

Much of the data used by Abbotsforward was readily available in past year Canadian Censuses and Regional District surveys while other municipal studies were used as reference points. Our process has been well documented through social media, blogs, mainstream media, our website and well-watched videos to help other cities learn from, and hopefully exceed, our achievements.

Beyond this, specific policy examples like our innovative infill designation that increases densities strategically and is more permissive of subdivisions and different forms of housing is likely something many communities across BC could replicate. Many municipalities are struggling to deal with issues ranging from neighbourhood redevelopment, affordability, and compact growth. Abbotsforward's infill guidelines are a positive step towards addressing these challenges. The plan contains dozens of similar ground-breaking and innovative policy approaches that others can learn from.

10. KNOWLEDGE SHARING

What helpful advice would you share with other communities looking to embark on a similar project?

Abbotsforward's success is attributable to a very passionate, flexible, and multi-disciplinary team. There is a lot of work associated with planning engaging events on evenings and weekends. It requires being comfortable taking calculated risks and learning from mistakes. Not every event was successful, nor did every activity produce the desired engagement levels. What was important throughout the Abbotsforward process was not to be beholden to a single engagement method and stay within a certain comfort zone. Rather, Abbotsforward continued pushing the envelope as the project progressed, trying something new every step of the way. From a 'Big Ideas Fair' that took over an empty storefront in Abbotsford's historic downtown, to a Popup Park that took over a major shopping centre parking lot, the creativity and ambition of the project knew few limits. This was the product of fostering great relationships with the consultants, Dialog and Toderian UrbanWorks, who were generous with suggestions and alternatives, and who also pushed the City of Abbotsford to be bold at each turn.

11. TELL US MORE

Please share any other information you think may help support your submission.

As Abbotsforward was coming to an end, staff and the consultants reflected on the many accomplishments they had achieved. Below are the ten key elements that have made this project and plan a true game-changer:

• A catalyst for culture change and turning point for the city's vision and aspirations

• A Plan that's engaging, exciting, readable and inspiring

• A new "business as usual" for how to engage the community

• A Plan and process successfully built on outcomes, not timeframes

• A Plan designed around 7 Big Ideas, each transformative and more than the sum of the parts

• A new alignment of land-use and transportation, and reprioritized mobility with streets as people places

• An evidence-based, smart and legible urban structure focussing on growing up and in rather than out

• New and innovative opportunities for "gentle infill" for more complete communities and ageing in place

• A "new math" for City Hall including full cost of growth, and aligned budgets

• A new focus on implementation and follow through, ensuring this plan continues to be transformative