

2016 COMMUNITY EXCELLENCE AWARDS APPLICATION BEST PRACTICES, Community Connections

Filled Friday, June 17, 2016

Name of Local Government

Township of Langley

Project/Program Manager Name

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Title

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

Yes

Project/Program Title:

Mayor's Standing Committee Public Engagement

Project Summary Paragraph

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

In February 2015, Township of Langley Mayor Jack Froese established the Mayor's Standing Committee on Public Engagement to explore ways of better connecting staff and Council with the public as it relates to the planning and development of community plans and projects. The Committee's overall goal endeavored to better ensure that meaningful two-way dialogue occurs consistently. The Committee consisted of 3 community members, 2 Councillors and Mayor Froese. The Committee undertook several public engagement activities including past process analysis, researching best practices, surveying other Lower Mainland municipalities, interviewing key stakeholders, and hosting three Open Houses to hear from the community about their values for providing input on planning and development. Through their dedicated efforts over the course of several months within one year, the Committee was successful in bringing a Public Engagement Strategy and detailed Implementation Plan forward to Council for consideration and subsequent adoption in March 2016.

Project Analysis

1. INSPIRATION

What was the inspiration behind the program/project?

When it comes to managing growth and the development of neighborhoods in the Township of Langley, people have different viewpoints. As one of the fastest growing municipalities in BC, featuring a unique blend of urban and rural lifestyles,

the Township's current population of 116,000 is expected to double by 2041. As more people choose to make the Township their home, it is important that we work together to create images of possibilities for our future.

Through the Township's existing Sustainability Charter, Council has made a commitment to focus on community involvement – identifying that open, inclusive and consultative community involvement is vital to convergent thinking and effective decision making. Some citizens, however, reached out to Mayor Froese, sharing that they felt their voices were sometimes being lost in existing community planning initiatives. While this situation is not unique to the Township, Mayor Froese made a commitment to the community to improve dialogue and public engagement through the establishment of the Standing Committee on Public Engagement to look at past practices, at best practices and to finding new ways for civic engagement and deliberative dialogue in our community.

With advances in technology and with people's busy lives, public expectations around community consultation and involvement are changing, and provided the Township with a renewed opportunity to take a closer look at making meaningful improvements, and the Standing Committee integrated citizen inclusivity in that very process.

2. GOALS

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

To make meaningful community connections, promote greater understanding, and to support generative dialogue and engagement for better community planning decision making, the Committee identified “six success factors” to improve engagement.

1. Having a clear engagement policy and consistent processes to support that policy;
2. Implementing proactive and ongoing communications with all concerned;
3. Ensuring role clarity (for staff, Council, citizens and proponents) during engagement and decision making;
4. Confirming that engagement is a Council priority;
5. Providing sufficient organizational capacity; and
6. Ensuring an engagement-supportive culture within the organization and community.

(No response)

Through the Committee's work, a Public Engagement Strategy was developed, including 10 specific goals:

1. Act as a genuinely engaged and responsive community-serving institution
2. Act neutrally in planning and development and engagement processes, using input to effectively guide Council discussions and decision-making
3. Act transparently and efficiently in engagement
4. Be a leader in public engagement culture and capacity
5. Use proactive and ongoing communication and education protocols, skills and tools
6. Broaden and diversity community participation in engagement
7. Go to where people are and use creative engagement tools to make it fun and easy to participate
8. Allow all concerned to speak to issues and carefully consider all input received
9. Use ongoing, constructive and community-wide dialogue on growth, development and community issues
10. Increase public awareness about comprehensive planning

These goals then formed the Township's Public Engagement Implementation Plan with specific tasks, actions, priorities, timelines and resources to be measured and achieved by 2018.

3. STRATEGY

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

The Township uses social media, including FaceBook and Twitter, on a daily basis as part of its communications and outreach. From information on services & programs; to events & open houses; to notices & alerts, etc. After preliminary works by the Standing Committee, three (3) new online deliberative dialogue and engagement tools were launched in June 2015.

1. An engagement portal and webpage tol.ca/engagetol - for the community to share their ideas about effective public engagement, to find out about upcoming engagement opportunities and keep up-to-date on the Committee's progress;
2. An email address for the public to directly connect with the Committee at engage@tol.ca;

3. An eNotification/eAlert subscription service for interested citizens to receive updates and information on upcoming community dialogues and public engagement opportunities.

Branding for public engagement – engageTOL - was established as a new municipal standard to be used in all public engagement communications. Social media hashtags specific to #Langley and to #engageTOL are being used as a standard to get the word out about dialogue and public engagement in the community.

As part of the overall communication strategy, the Standing Committee hosted 3 separate Public Engagement Open Houses at 3 different dates and locations. At each, participants received an “Engagement Passport” to navigate through sequenced interactive stations to learn about public engagement and to vote on what matters for them. Over 300 persons participated, with more than 50 participating in dialogic roundtables, and with 158 persons providing input and feedback through event laptops or paper forms.

4. PARTICIPATION

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

With Council’s adoption of the Public Engagement Strategy and Implementation Plan, staff now have appropriate new tools and resources to consistently carry out and measure dialogic public engagement related to planning and developing community plans. Since its adoption, staff have:

- Modified event sign-in registry standards to include an opportunity for attendees to self-elect to receive future community consultations, dialogues and events via email. More than 2/3 of Open House participants elected to subscribe;
- Collaborated with the Urban Development Institute to implement a Council-adopted Township Policy for Proponent-Led Engagement Activities effective March 2016;
- Evaluated existing engagement efforts with the goal of making community planning information easier to understand, follow and get involved;
- Collaborated with Simon Fraser University to provide key staff with training to better cultivate internal capacity for community civic engagement and dialogue;
- Commissioned a public-friendly short video series about planning and development fundamentals to be hosted on the LangleyTownship YouTube channel;

- Diversified public outreach, including early communications, about community plan activities through media releases, eVites, community flyers, postcard invites, social media, newspaper ads, area road-side signs/boards, dedicated & easy to navigate webpages, public project binders at community centres and libraries, etc.;
- Added improved dialogic techniques for community planning events such as focus groups, hands-on design charrettes, World Cafes, Q&A sessions, idea walls, live surveys, SimCity blocks, interactive community mapping, etc.; and
- Have recently brought a draft Public Engagement Charter to the community for public input and inclusion.

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.

The Township is actively engaged using FaceBook and Twitter on a daily basis as part of our communications and community outreach. From information on services & programs; to events & open houses; to notices & alerts, etc. #Langley is used in all Township issued social media posts and #engageTOL is now in use for all public consultation and engagement. To increase views and broaden awareness, the Township has equally purchased FaceBook boosts for some of our initiatives.

Social media is being used to promote dialogue using appreciative inquiry by asking questions that come from a place of curiosity.

Through the Fall 2015 Public Engagement Open Houses, the 300+ participants were asked to share – by “dotmocracy” voting – about what’s important to them. At each station, information display panels provided background with questions to vote on. A number of questions about digital engagement including social media, multimedia, online tools and mobility were asked. More than 50% identified that the Township should use social media “a lot” to notify people about how to get involved. 85% said that public input through social media and online tools should be identifiable; with only 15% of participants stating that input anonymity is acceptable. 74% said that they want to be able to view the comments of others when it comes to community planning, with only 26% stating that input should be private to the Township. This data has helped to inform specific social media activities in the adopted Public Engagement Implementation Plan.

5. ECONOMIC IMPACT

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

Being considered one of the fastest growing municipalities in British Columbia, with our population expected to double to more than 211,000 by 2040, and being named in the Top 6 municipalities for jobs in BC, it is essential that we take careful consideration into our community plans' economic impacts and opportunities.

Since the inception of the Public Engagement Strategy and Implementation Plan, a new standard for all community plan-oriented communications activities has standardized resources, including early notification, eNotification subscriber service, social media messaging, a dedicated webpage, media releases, etc. Further, engagement events equally have standardized resources including display panels (larger than poster size), interactive exercises such as dialogue roundtables, design charrettes, etc. and opportunities to provide feedback in-person or online. This standardization is resulting in the reduced need to create initiative-specific resources and is equally achieving efficiencies through redundancy elimination.

As an offshoot of the Committee's work, a "Business Walk" was conducted in 2015. Outreach to 63 businesses in the business core of the Brookwood-Fernridge community was initiated, led by Mayor and Council, along with leads from local business organizations and by Township staff, who went door-to-door in November 2015 talking with business owners and managers about their business and about expansion & growth plans and opportunities. Having this insight, from the vantage of emergent dialogue, convergent thinking and areas of cohesion realized through dialogue with the business community and area residents equally, will continue to help better position the Township with plans that include growth and urban living.

6. INNOVATION

What makes this program/project innovative and creative?

As part of the best practices research completed by the Standing Committee, numerous municipalities across the Lower Mainland were contacted and asked for their support by completing a by-phone interview. Of the 22 municipalities contacted, 17 responded, with just 4 stating that their municipality had a formal engagement policy.

The Township is taking a strong dialogic leadership role in creating a deeper unity of purpose through making meaningful community connections, generative dialogue and diverse public engagement. Through the Township's Public Engagement Charter, we are making an inclusion commitment to all community stakeholder

groups. The Charter, which was created as part of the Public Engagement Strategy, shares the Township's policy framework and aspirations for public engagement as it equally identifies engagement roles and responsibilities for each of (i) Mayor and Council; (ii) citizens and (iii) staff.

To help stakeholders, we have equally made a commitment to help broaden the community's understanding of the fundamentals of planning and development. A series of short videos has been commissioned and videos will be hosted on the LangleyTownship YouTube channel and be available for viewing at engagement activities and events.

These works and commitment equally weaves strongly into the municipality's transformational eGovernment Strategy, adopted in 2013. The overall purpose of this strategy is to establish initiatives and deliverables that foster a more citizen-centred, efficient and results-oriented organization through cultural, economic, social and environmental goals. Amongst 4 specific core initiatives within this strategy, a commitment to engagement through collaborative and participatory eActivities and eCommunications.

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.

Through the Committee's 2015 Public Engagement Open Houses, we learned that there are some systemic areas in the area of dialogic standards within our Corporate Communications Plan that we need to work on that will help to augment meaningful dialogue through social media. These are being addressed more comprehensively through a renewed commitment to our Corporate Communications Plan and equally through our eGovernment Strategy.

Through the Public Engagement Open Houses, we learned from the 300 participating citizens that want to see improvement in how and when we engage. For example, they identified that the Township reporting back to the community from/post engagement and being transparent in decision making are important to them. Our community also shared with us that they want more notifications and early engagement in community plan development. These are foundational communication pieces that the organization will better align within the Corporate Communications Plan to help increase engagement in an effective way through tools such as social media. Open House participants further shared that they want a

range of digital engagement tools – from social media, to online forums, to online surveys, etc.

Capacity building – from both a technological perspective and an effective staff resource perspective – is critical to being able to deliver on these in addition to in-person dialogue and engagement activities and are contained within the adopted eGovernment Strategy.

8. BEST PRACTICES

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

The Township is taking a strong dialogic leadership role in creating a deeper unity of purpose through making meaningful community connections, generative dialogue and diverse public engagement. Through the Committee's best practices research, it was identified that 4 of the 17 Lower Mainland municipalities contacted had a formal engagement policy.

Mayor and Council have adopted a Public Engagement Strategy with a corresponding Implementation Plan that lists specific deliverables and due dates, and are working with the community to support the adoption of a Public Engagement Charter.

With a dedicated webpage that ensures transparency of this strategy & implementation plan, additional touch-points with our community have been created, including: a dedicated email address engage@tol.ca, an engagement logo / brand, eNotification options, and a commissioned, public-oriented short video series about community plan development, etc. The Township has and will continue to invest in creating a better future for our community through greater involvement of the public.

Since the adoption of the above, the Township has successfully brought a number of community plan public engagement opportunities to the public in 2016 alone, including our Smith neighborhood plan, Williams neighborhood plan and our Brookwood Fernridge neighborhood plan. For each, a variety of engagement activities have been deployed, including but not limited to, community dialogues, design charrettes, visioning open houses, surveys, etc. The municipality has also adopted a Policy on proponent-led engagement activities, through collaborative leadership with the Urban Development Institute, to mirror the engagement activities of the Township as it relates to community development.

9. TRANSFERABILITY

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

Gaining an understanding of how municipalities have made a commitment to dialogue and public engagement, as well as looking at their best practices in this area were essential first steps to being in a position to recommend a future direction.

As noted in (8), while many municipalities have not yet adopted a formal engagement policy or framework, all interviewed spoke to the importance of having an internal culture that values dialogue and engagement, as well as having a supportive Council. Having completed this foundational work, this becomes a resource for interested municipalities to access as they consider formalizing their own commitment to public engagement.

Setting the stage for meaningful dialogue and for authentic engagement in our community, the Committee's work – over the course of just 1 year - has enabled our Mayor & Council as well as staff to have a direct understanding of what our community specifically values when it comes to community plan development. The contributions made by the community have been listened to and have been incorporated into what is now the Township's adopted Public Engagement Strategy, associated Implementation Plan, which includes specific actions & timelines, as well as the draft Public Engagement Charter.

These resources are available online through our website for use/reference by interested other local governments. By sharing our mutual works, as local governments we can learn from each other by creating collective capacity and shared intelligence to see dialogue and public engagement through in our respective communities.

10. KNOWLEDGE SHARING

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

Create a foundation of neutrality: To ensure that community genuinely better understood that the works of the Committee came from a place of curiosity, not advocacy or positioning, the Committee elected to work with a reputable, external public engagement consultant in completing its work.

Commit to organizational culture change: Effective, progressive public engagement is iterative and requires ongoing dialogic leadership and commitment. The works of the Committee set the foundation for the municipality's future commitment to

public engagement. With an adopted Implementation Plan containing 50+ tasks, an essential element is appropriate funding levels, to have sufficient, ongoing funding and resources to sustain public engagement long term.

Be transparent: The Committee made every part of its works available to the public in a number of ways and mediums. At all stages of its in-person work in the community, the Committee members engaged with the public coming from a place of curiosity to understand, and spoke about their work cohesively.

Identify an achievable project timeline: The Committee set out to complete its work over a period of nine months – to ensure its works were robust & comprehensive, and equally effective & efficient. Working with the external consultant, the Committee was required to regularly assess time and effort commitments to specific tasks in order to achieve its commitment to the project timeline. As work progressed, while there were many opportunities to expand the scope of work and consequently extend the project timeline, the Committee focused in earnest to achieve the identified goals.

11. TELL US MORE

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

We have a photo gallery available from our public engagement activities if this is of interest.