

Submission: 2016 Community Excellence Awards
Category: Best Practices, Community Connections

Name of Local Government: City of Penticton

Project/Program Title: Shape Your City Penticton – Parks and Recreation Master Plan
Project Summary Paragraph

Parks and recreation form a part of the unique identity of Penticton and as such our community is passionate about policies and decisions on this subject. In order to draft a Parks and Recreation Master Plan that will guide decisions on Parks and Recreation for the next ten years, the City is delivering a robust engagement strategy that spans best practice for both in-person engagement and an innovative online strategy that included the launch of the online engagement hub, ShapeYourCityPenticton.ca. The combined methods have been designed to reach out to our community and gain feedback from youth, busy families, diverse stakeholder groups and those otherwise not traditionally engaged in offering feedback to City processes. Feedback has been overwhelmingly positive with overall recognition that “The City of Penticton is doing its best to leave no stone unturned in its quest to be better engaged with the public, especially when it comes to developing the new Parks and Recreation Master plan.”

Project Analysis

Please answer each question in 250 words or less in 11 pt Arial font (our judges value directness and brevity). If you experience difficulty answering a particular question, consider the aspects of your program that may relate to the question and show us how they are linked. Remember to include measurable results whenever possible.

1. INSPIRATION

In 2015, The City of Penticton worked closely with Gateway Casinos to assess public opinion and concern over the expansion of their Penticton property. This included use of the online platform, Engagement HQ. The online format disseminated clear information and gathered important feedback while answering community questions. The project was well accepted by the community and is now underway. As well in 2014 and 2015, the City worked hard to use innovative in-person consultation techniques in its development of its waterfront and downtown revitalization projects. This included well attended Open Houses with interactive design charrettes. Feedback again was very positive and the projects have enjoyed overwhelming success and community support. These projects provided much of the inspiration to ensure the important Parks and Recreation Master Plan was driven by community input and reflected community values and needs. We have learned that robust community engagement increases the success of our projects and enhances the credibility of decision making.

2. GOALS

What did you set out to accomplish with the program/project? How effectively did you meet your goals?

ShapeYourCityPenticton – Parks and Recreation Master Plan aims to reach out to a broad segment of community members and garner input from those not otherwise engaged with City processes. We wanted to develop a Master Plan that reflects community needs and community values. We set out to engage diverse stakeholders and launch an online platform where busy residents could stay involved, feel informed and offer their ideas and feedback in order to draft a

Plan that was driven by community ideas. To date, we have held 16 Focus Group Discussions, hosted a well-attended Open House, spoken to hundreds of market goers through our outreach booth at the local community market and attended sports fields during high volume times to reach families. We have had robust print and radio campaigns to raise awareness of our events and online content. We have also used Facebook promotion to garner a reach of nearly 10,000 targeted residents in order to drive attendance to our events and to promote online participation. As well, we have launched a new online engagement hub that clearly disseminates information through timelines and progress charts as well as objectives and background. The online hub also offers opportunities to generate ideas, see community voting on ideas, offers quick polls, full surveys, mapping tools to visualize parks and recreation areas, a community discussion forum, and a forum for asking questions to key staff guiding the Parks and Recreation Master Plan process. The site has been extensively promoted online as well as in print. Uptake has been very positive and will be referenced below through extensive analytic tracking.

3. ROLE

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

Social media has played significant role in creating awareness of the Master Plan process, driving traffic to our multiple events and converting online participation in our new engagement website, ShapeYourCityPenticton.ca. Facebook specifically, has allowed us to target demographics of residents that we know have been traditionally silent on many areas that directly affect them. For instance, through paid boosting of our sites we were able to reach nearly 10,000 residents that had listed Parks and Recreation related interests and were within a specific demographic that find it difficult to come to physical events due to family commitments. Social shares and commenting have been successful and overwhelmingly positive. We were able to create visually stimulating content, engaging calls to action and convert followers directly to registered participants in our engagement website.

4. PARTICIPATION

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

The engagement strategy employs four of the five levels in the recognized International Association for Public Participation IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum. These are inform, consult, involve and collaborate. The final stage is empower which generally entails a referendum. Council took applications and appointed a community based Steering Committee to guide the Master Plan process. The Committee has been involved from everything to branding, to messaging, survey question creation, market booth participation and online forums. They have served as engaged community ambassadors for the project and enhanced community support for the process.

We have also recorded robust community participation numbers both in person and online. Our Open House is just one of three and hosted more than 140 participants. Our 16 Focus Group Discussions have brought together more than 300 active user groups ranging from the Penticton Indian Band to Penticton High School students and many sports and nature user groups in between. We have completed a statistically significant random telephone survey that included over 400 participants. Our brand new online engagement hub has recorded nearly 2000 unique visitors and over 250 registered contributors. The online brainstormer tool has itself generated nearly 190 ideas for the Parks and Recreation Master Plan. The site runs 5 discussion forums, multiple surveys, a participatory mapping tool and an easy online Q&A hub.

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.

Facebook metrics tell us our reach for local residents for selected, promoted posts have reached nearly a third of our population.

Through our online engagement hub we know that we have recorded nearly 2000 unique visitors and over 250 registered contributors. The online brainstormer tool has itself generated nearly 190 ideas for the Parks and Recreation Master Plan. The site runs 5 discussion forums, multiple surveys, a participatory mapping tool and an easy online Q&A hub.

5. ECONOMIC IMPACT

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

The online hub, innovative social media and digital media promotion have allowed us to cut back on our physical engagement budget while actually reaching more of our residents. The online platform was built through supplied templates by staff and is managed and updated by City staff.

6. INNOVATION

What makes this program/project innovative and creative?

We have taken full advantage of this concerted push for online engagement amid a full roster of in-person events as to fully engage those traditionally involved in City processes. The site makes use of interesting participatory mapping tools, social media oriented tools where participants can vote and 'like' ideas generated by their peers. The site offers discussion forums that aggregate comments, and hosts integrations with external sites like Fluid Surveys. It gathers data according to Canadian and British Columbia standards and offers us tools for keeping in touch with participants. Content itself is designed in plain English and despite being an advanced platform, is easy to use with intuitive navigation and auto-replies, prompts and confirmations that offer complete transparency to our processes. The online hub is completely managed by City staff.

7. CHALLENGES

Tell us about some of the challenges you have faced in the implementation and operation of your social media platforms and the solutions to these challenges.

Early on we encountered some users of the online site that did not have a lot of online experience but still wanted to contribute to the platform. Through 'help' processes that linked directly to City staff, we were able to trouble shoot problems. Participants spoke directly with City staff and not a third party operator.

8. BEST PRACTICES

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

Few communities as small as Penticton have launched such a comprehensive in-person and online engagement strategy as we have done in the past months. ShapeYourCityPenticton.ca meets the calibre of engagement sites comparable to Calgary, Vancouver and Halifax.

9. TRANSFERABILITY

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

The online components of our engagement strategy are directly transferable to other local governments as many small municipalities share constrained budgets and the need to access the 'silent majority' of citizens that are hard at work raising families and making ends meet.

In the coming months, we will use the ShapeYourCityPenticton.ca site for multiple projects to garner community feedback. This includes are facilities master plan and an update to our Official Community Plan. We have already built a repository of residents that want to engage with us in a different medium and we will continue to use these tools to further engage our residents.

10. KNOWLEDGE SHARING

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

I feel online space is a growing opportunity for local governments. Municipal websites often hold so much operational information and rarely offer opportunities to be interactive. Online engagement hubs like ShapeYourCityPenticton.ca are a chance for community members to get involved, stay involved and really drive planning. It is an economical and manageable way for small cities to reach out to more people. I highly recommend integrating any efforts at online engagement with a robust digital marketing and social media strategy. This saves time, money and consolidates work.

11. TELL US MORE

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