



**2013 COMMUNITY EXCELLENCE AWARDS
Category Worksheet**

BEST PRACTICES, Civic Engagement

Name of Local Government: District of Maple Ridge

Project/Program Title: Live-Streamed Budget Meeting Increases Public Participation Tenfold!

Project Summary Paragraph

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

The District of Maple Ridge strives for meaningful engagement with stakeholders and citizens to ensure quality municipal decision-making and well-informed citizens who participate in civic processes. To provide information and reach a broader audience for the purpose of receiving valuable feedback, the District has been taking steps to improve and enhance public engagement.

Many improvements have been made to District processes, the most recent being the implementation of a first ever 'Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session' broadcast live over the Internet for viewers to watch on their computers, smartphones and tablets.

Questions that were received from viewers by telephone, email, Facebook, Twitter, and as audience members were read aloud and answered during the live session, and answers were also provided to the question provider through the same method it was received.

Participation was tenfold the numbers seen in previous years!

Project Analysis

Please answer the question in 300 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

What was the inspiration behind the program/project?

In the 2012 Citizens Survey, less than 2% of respondents indicated that they wanted to come to the Maple Ridge municipal hall to participate in municipal processes. The survey also indicated that web-based alternatives tended to be the means by which residents wanted to participate.

It was clear that the District needed to find a way to reach out to and connect with citizens and stakeholders because our current methods weren't as effective as they could be.

2. GOALS

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

Based on 2012 Citizens Survey responses, web-based alternatives were the preferred means of communications by citizens. To reach out to and connect with citizens and stakeholders, the District would need to embrace the Internet and social media.

The District's 2012 business planning process was broadcast live over the Internet to cater to a wider number of people who would not otherwise be able to attend as members of the audience. Viewers could watch the meeting on their computer, smartphone or tablet, and they could ask questions through a dedicated phone line, an email through the District website, an email/comment on the District Facebook page, or through a 'tweet' on the District Twitter account.

In previous years, there were at most 3 observers in the audience who may have asked a handful of questions. This year, the total number of participants was 35, ten times more than previous years! Of those participants, 11 submitted questions.

3. PARTICIPATION

a. How was the community involved in your program/project? Please provide measurable results.

The public was invited to view the business planning/budget presentation and ask questions, as per usual. To appeal to a wider audience who might not otherwise attend, the 2012 budget presentation was broadcast live over the Internet and viewers could watch the meeting on their computer, smartphone or tablet.

On Monday, December 10, 2012, with Maple Ridge Council looking on, District staff began the 'Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session' with a brief introduction to the Business Planning Process and then spoke to an overview of the Financial Plan, including what had occurred with District of Maple Ridge finances in 2012 and what staff were preparing for in 2013 and beyond. Proposed property taxes for the average home in 2013 were then reviewed.

The presentation provided context for viewers. Business plan reports were available online in advance of the presentation, so viewers could follow along. The meeting was then opened up for questions from the public in the audience, and those out in cyberspace. Questions could be submitted through:

- the Floor Director
- a dedicated telephone line
- emails through a special email box on the District website
- email/comment on the District Facebook page
- a 'tweet' on the District Twitter account.

The entire session ran for more than an hour to much success!

On the date of the presentation, there were 126 visitors to the presentation's webpage, and from December 11, 2012, up until now, there have been 117 visitors to that webpage meaning that people are still interested in the presentation.

b. Tell us about all levels of teamwork involved in making this program/project possible. Include a description of any barriers or challenges it was necessary to overcome.

Although the Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session went off without a hitch, the journey to get there was not without its challenges. Nineteen staff from multiple District departments formed the 'Team'.

Limited funding required reprioritization of the District's Information Technology (IT) resources to successfully implement the live-streamed public meeting.

A 'war-room' was set up with several lap top computers in close proximity to the broadcast location. Staff were at the ready to receive questions from the various channels, a dedicated telephone line, an email through the District website, an email/comment on the District Facebook page, or through a 'tweet' on the District Twitter account.

Questions were printed individually on index cards which were delivered by a runner to the Floor Director to read the questions aloud in Council Chambers. Audience participants were invited to write questions on index cards, which were read out by the Floor Director. All questions were answered by either the Presenter or other senior staff in attendance.

A several page listing of possible questions and answers was developed through meetings held with District staff to gather frequently asked questions and the answers that should be provided.

A list of action items, responsibilities and timelines kept everyone involved on track, and several rehearsals were orchestrated to ensure staff were well practiced and ready for the session.

The Corporate Management Team reserved their decision to go ahead with the project until they had the opportunity to review some of the rehearsals and see the project development in action. Because there was no precedent for this type of broadcast, it was important to ensure that the form and content would add value for citizens rather than create confusion; therefore, the final decision to go ahead was received very close to the go live date.

4. ECONOMIC IMPACT

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

We made the choice to use internal resources and to upgrade our equipment at a cost about \$5,000 not including staff time. These upgrades not only benefitted this event, but will be valuable for future initiatives, such as emergency planning events and open houses, and more.

By using internal resources, the District was able to forgo the cost of hiring an external consultant. A quote was obtained to have a video production company handle the audio and video portion of the project. The amount of the quote was \$15,000.

5. ACCOUNTABILITY

How has this program/project improved upon accountability to the community's citizens?

It would have been very easy to maintain the status quo and push the budget through the standard newspaper ads that invite the public to participate in the District's business planning processes by attending a Council meeting at municipal hall. We chose to offer citizens the opportunity to participate by asking questions and providing feedback from the comfort of their own homes through their computer, smartphone or tablet.

The public is welcome to comment or ask questions of the budget throughout the year, but few choose to do so. This Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session, a public meeting broadcast live on the Internet, made senior staff available to the public to answer questions and address comments on the spot regarding the District of Maple Ridge budget. There is nowhere to hide during a live meeting, no dodging the question, and no time to cleverly formulate a well-crafted response to an unexpected question that might come from left field. Staff were vulnerable, and they were ready.

As always happens for events like these, time eventually runs out and the session ends. Some questions did not get answered during the Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session because of time constraints, or they came in after the event ended. A recording of the session is posted on the District of Maple Ridge website: <http://bit.ly/174zEPN>, as are all the questions and responses that were posed to staff through the variety of social media channels regardless of when they were received.

6. AWARENESS

How has this program/project created more awareness in the community about local government actions?

The delivery format of the live-streamed Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session over the Internet is such that people don't have to leave the comfort of their own homes to participate, they can watch and ask questions or comment through their computers, smartphones or tablets. More than ten times the number of participants was recorded during this presentation than in previous years.

Coverage through the local paper spoke to the uniqueness and success of the Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session. The article spoke to the experimental nature of the District of Maple Ridge budget discussion and the variety of channels that were available for the public to get involved. The article also addressed some of the questions that arose during the session, which included some issues that are often the subject of letters to the editor of the local paper. This article was published online and in the paper copy of the newspaper. An excerpt from the published article:

"Discussion about Maple Ridge's budget didn't go viral, it wasn't trending on Twitter, but the experiment that took the dusty dry topic of municipal finance into the realm of social media worked Monday night."

To view the newspaper article in its entirety, please visit: <http://bit.ly/1bGikPN>.

According to ComBase – the Canadian Community Newspaper Database, nine out of ten adults are print or online newspaper readers.

7. INNOVATION

What makes this program/project innovative and creative?

The Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session is unique because:

- The District of Maple Ridge is one of the first municipalities to broadcast a live-streamed budget meeting.
- The District is the only municipality that provided an opportunity for the public to submit questions through a variety of options, including a dedicated telephone line, an email through the District website, an email/comment on the District Facebook page, or through a 'tweet' on the District Twitter account.
- Questions were read aloud and answered during the meeting in front of the audience. Answers were also provided to the question provider through the same method it was received.

This session showcased the District's ability to use several technologically advanced communication channels that had not been used in previous years to proactively cater to a wider community audience who may not otherwise be able to attend these meetings.

This demonstrates the District of Maple Ridge's level of understanding of community needs, and the ability to proactively planning to meet these needs and save community money by utilizing internal resources.

8. SUSTAINABILITY

What measures have you put in place to ensure the continued operation of this initiative? (*e.g. staff time, resources, financial*)

The success of the Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session has put infrastructure into place with equipment upgrades and enhanced staff knowledge that will be utilized for other initiatives, such as emergency planning, open houses, etc.

Already plans are being formulated for the District of Maple Ridge 2013 Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session to be held in Fall of 2013.

9. BEST PRACTICES

What sets this program/project apart as a winning idea? Why should it be considered a best practice, in comparison to other similar programs?

We often hear that it isn't easy for the public to participate in meetings for a number of reasons, they're held during work hours, during commuting hours, etc. By holding this event in the evening, streaming it live and offering citizens a number of channels to communicate with the District (telephone, email, Facebook, Twitter, in person) we have removed a number of barriers to their participation.

This session showcased the District's ability to use several technologically advanced communication channels that had not been used in previous years to proactively cater to a wider community audience who may not otherwise be able to attend these meetings. This demonstrates the District of Maple Ridge's level of understanding of community needs, and the ability to proactively planning to meet these needs and save community money by utilizing internal resources.

Staff involved in the project had never participated in anything similar in the past, so the experience allowed them to expand their knowledge, skills and abilities at a minimal cost to the District.

10. TRANSFERABILITY

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

This event could be replicated by other local governments looking to provide the public with additional channels to comment on the financial plan. The key to the success was the level of preparation in advance of the event. As District staff learned by going through this process, information technology is a largely iterative consideration and it requires as much lead time as possible.

Some key lessons that we learned:

- Make sure that you test all of the audio and video equipment extensively. You have one shot at a live meeting, and technical issues can be mitigated with solid planning and testing.
- Run practice sessions so that participants can understand the pace and cadence of the presentation. Have your staff grill managers with the most difficult questions so that they become at ease responding.
- Try not to answer questions too literally. Find the key point that a citizen is driving at and provide a complete answer.
- Follow up with all questioners to determine if they got the answer they needed, or need more information.
- Have a back-up for key members of the team in case of illness. Once you commit to the broadcast, you need to deliver.
- Do not use jargon. Speak the language that citizens will understand.
- Have a meeting structure and have a meeting moderator or chair that can ensure decorum.

11. KNOWLEDGE SHARING

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

The Maple Ridge Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session actual event was little more than an hour, but well over 180 man hours went into its preparation.

Advice to municipalities would be for them to talk with District of Maple Ridge staff involved in the Business Planning Live Question and Answer Session to understand what was involved in the initiative, and what they would need to undertake and coordinate for their own presentation events. Further, it would be suggested that they keep the first year's presentation low key so that they can see what works for them and what areas might need improvement.

12. TELL US MORE

Please share any other information you think may help us better understand your submission.

The team that helped make this possible was anchored with staff members from the District of Maple Ridge Finance Department who had detailed knowledge of the budget preparation and terminology. In addition, members of the team who had personal experience on social media were the point persons monitoring the channels.

This core team was supported by Information Technology and Communications team members, whose expertise could help deal with the more technical aspects of the program delivery.

An added benefit of this type of project is that it helps Finance department staff understand how citizens, who may not be well versed in corporate finance terminology and practices, view the budget process. That, in turn, leads to better summary and narrative documents that can more easily be processed by the public.