

Region of Waterloo
Resident Experience, Strategy, and Communications
Corporate Strategy, Performance, and Resident Experience

To: Strategic Planning and Budget Committee
Meeting Date: December 3, 2025
Report Title: 2026 Plan and Budget Community Engagement Summary

1. Recommendation

For information.

2. Purpose / Issue:

To provide an overview of the community engagement process for the 2026 Plan and Budget and a summary of the input received.

3. Strategic Plan:

This report supports all four focus areas of the Region's Growing with Care Strategic Plan. Feedback is gathered from community related to all areas of the plan and will inform the development of the Region's 2026 Plan and Budget.

4. Report Highlights:

- Offering residents opportunities to engage in dialogue about the Region's budget process and to increase awareness about the essential services the Region provides is a key strategy to building trust and relationships with community.
- The Region's bi-annual Resident Survey conducted in 2024 indicated residents are looking for more opportunities for education, feedback and conversation on the budget. This has formed the focus of engagement for this year's plan and budget.
- Thousands of residents were reached through a wide range of engagement activities that aimed to reach residents across the Region and from a variety of perspectives and experiences. Engagement for the 2026 Plan and Budget began in June 2025 and continues throughout the budget process. Tactics included online engagement, community outreach at events and community spaces, presentations, public input sessions and community meetings.
- Perspectives of residents varied, but a prominent theme across engagements was affordability and the Region's tax increases in relation to inflation. Many residents indicated they did not want to reach affordability by reducing essential services. Residents attending engagement sessions in Cambridge and the Townships raised

concerns about value for money in terms of services delivered in relation to taxation levels.

- Residents provided input about service levels for specific services such as transit, waste collection, affordable housing, homelessness supports, active transportation and cycling network, climate response, childcare, arts, and anti-hate initiatives. Some expressed a desire to reduce services. Many indicated that these core services don't meet current community needs and should be enhanced.

5. Background:

- A 2024 Resident Survey conducted for the 2025 Plan and Budget process found that the more residents understood how their taxes were spent, the more value they perceived for their taxes. Additionally, they asked for more plain language, visually engaging information about the budget process.
- In response, the focus for 2026 Plan and Budget engagement has been on building trust and relationships with community, growing understanding about the Region and its budget process, and offering opportunities for feedback and dialogue.
- Engagement was built on information gathered from previous research such as the 2024 Resident Survey, Mini Wellbeing Survey, Youth Impact Survey, Immigrant Survey, Vital Signs Report and other service specific engagement at the Region.
- Engagement began in the Spring of 2025 and is ongoing throughout this budget cycle. Key strategies included:
 - Community outreach display at events across the Region for a variety of audiences e.g. KW Multicultural Festival, Cambridge Tri-Pride, Wellesley Community BBQ, North Dumfries Community Services Fair, Elmira Multicultural Fair, Kitchener and Cambridge Farmers Markets.
 - Interactive EngageWR page.
 - Presentations to advisory committees and community groups e.g. Grand River Accessibility Advisory Committee, Youth Advisory Group, KW Accessibility.
 - Two Public Input Sessions held at Regional Headquarters at 150 Frederick Street, Kitchener and two Community Budget Consultation Sessions held at Cambridge and Elmira.
- Engagement opportunities were promoted via EngageWR newsletters, social media, the Region's website and on our EngageWR site.
- The two Community Plan and Budget Consultation meetings were a new strategy this year at the request of Council to increase engagement in Cambridge and the Townships. A brief overview of the Plan and Budget process and financial situation was provided followed by small group discussions and informal dialogue. Some Councillors and staff were present to connect with community. Residents in attendance expressed appreciation for the opportunities for dialogue via this approach as compared to traditional public input delegations.

- We connected with over 1,000 residents through various methods. Qualitative feedback was collected through open ended online feedback and conversation. Input received across all tactics has been summarized into key themes that were common topics.
 - **Affordability and level of taxes**
 - Top of mind for many is the affordability of tax increases that are greater than the rate of inflation. This was felt particularly by seniors with fixed incomes and individuals on ODSP or other income support programs.
 - Some advocated for improved efficiency. One resident stated “the Region cannot be all things to all people”.
 - Equally, many are concerned about maintaining core services that are essential to daily life. Some are willing to pay increased taxes to ensure these services are available and enhanced where needed.
 - Some expressed that we need to continue to focus on growing the economy.
 - Residents in some areas of the Region feel they are being taxed for certain services where they are not receiving the same level of service as other areas in the Region. This related to services such as transit.
 - **Service specific feedback**
 - Some residents expressed concerns about change to waste collection and wanted to ensure levels are maintained.
 - While some residents would like to see bike lanes reduced, many wanted improved cycling infrastructure and better connectivity across the network and to key amenities like parks and recreation.
 - Many were in favour of extending ION light rail to Cambridge and improving the overall transit network ensuring there is good connectivity across cities and townships. A minority questioned the need for light rail to extend to Cambridge.
 - Many expressed the essential nature of transit for seniors and others to get around in their daily lives. Many expressed a need for increased ridership incentives such as free/ reduced transit for selected groups and investigating advertising revenue further.
 - Housing affordability was frequently raised as a concern. Some indicated that incentives for private sector may not be enough, all levels of government need to fund these projects. Some were willing to pay more to see that happen. Some residents expressed concerns about homelessness and the need for upstream supports and addiction treatment.
 - Many supported the need for continued anti-hate and equity work, although there were some residents who questioned investments in this area.
 - Many expressed concerns there should be continued investment and focus on climate emergency responses and green energy, and it was suggested this can be embedded in much of the work we are already undertaking.

- Some expressed concern about the state of road repair.
- Individuals expressed support for more focus on community supports and services, mental health, child care, public safety measures, heritage and the arts.
- As identified, a key component of engagement this year was education about Regional services. These activities were very well received by residents and provided an excellent opportunity to educate the public about Regional services
- GRT surveyed residents from November 12 to 19 on its draft 2026 budget. The survey included questions on proposed service and fare changes. Approximately 380 responses were received. Respondents were more supportive of increases to service, including Township services, but expressed strong opposition to fare increases and reductions in service. A summary of the feedback received is provided in Appendix A.

6. Communication and Engagement with Area Municipalities and the Public

Area Municipalities: Engagement related to the 2026 Plan and Budget was conducted across all areas of the Region in conjunction with local events and gathering places in the cities and townships.

Public: Community engagement for the 2026 Plan and Budget focussed on building relationships, raising awareness and providing opportunities for feedback and dialogue. A variety of engagement strategies were used including online engagement, community outreach, presentations, public input sessions and community meetings. Over 1000 people were engaged through this process from June, 2025 and will continue to the end of the budget process.

7. Financial Implications:

The costs related to engagement and outreach are included in approved 2025 departmental budgets.

8. Conclusion / Next Steps:

Engagement opportunities for the 2026 Plan and Budget process will continue until the budget is approved with the EngageWR site and the final Public Input Session on December 3rd.

9. Attachments:

Appendix A: Summary Budget Engagement: Grand River Transit

Prepared By: Deb Bergey, Manager Community Engagement

Reviewed By: Jenny Smith, Director Corporate Strategy, Performance and Resident Experience

TJ Flynn, Director Corporate Communications and Engagement

Approved By: Connie MacDonald, Commissioner Resident Experience Strategy and Communications