

Region of Waterloo

Chief Administrative Officer

Strategic Planning and Strategic Initiatives

To: Strategic Planning and Budget Committee

Meeting Date: February 8, 2023

Report Title: 2023 Plan and Budget Engagement Overview

1. Recommendation

For Information.

2. Purpose / Issue:

To provide Committee with an overview of the engagement activities and insights from the 2023 Annual Plan and Budget process.

3. Strategic Plan:

The 2023 Plan and Budget Community Engagement and Communications strategy supports the Strategic Plan, specifically in the Responsive and Engaging Public Service focus areas, 5.1. Enhance opportunities for public engagement, input and involvement in Region of Waterloo Initiatives and 5.1. Provide excellent citizen centred service that enhances service satisfaction.

4. Report Highlights:

- Community engagement is critical to ensure the Region's annual plan and budget reflects changing community need and aspirations. The 2023 communications and engagement plan considered engagement conducted throughout 2022 and also included three specific methods of engagement: a statistically robust telephone survey; a comprehensive and widely available online survey; and, in person Council Public Input Sessions. Between the telephone and online survey over 2,600 responses were received which is an increase of 1,200 from last year.
- During the month of October, a Resident Experience and Priorities telephone survey was conducted that reached a randomized sample of 1,000 households based on thresholds required to have statistically representative results across the geography of Waterloo Region. Following are a few highlights of the survey. Appendix B provides the full results.

- When asked what issue the Region should pay the greatest attention to, large proportions of residents cite housing (29%) or homelessness (26%). These two issues are cited significantly more often than any other issue, including health care (9%), roads (8%) as the next most often cited issues.
- A strong majority (91%) of Waterloo Region residents say that their quality of life is very good/good, with only 8% saying it is poor/very poor.
- A strong majority (81%) of residents say they get very good or fairly good value for the tax dollars they pay. Only 17% of residents say that they receive poor value.
- Residents were asked about four taxation options the Region could pursue to address the increased cost of maintaining current service levels and infrastructure. These options were: increase taxes to increase/ enhance service; increase taxes in line with inflation to maintain services; maintain current taxes and reduce services; or reduce taxes and reduces services. Most residents commented they would prefer to increase taxes in line with inflation and maintain existing services.
- Over the months of November and December an online engagement site was launched to hear from residents beyond those selected for the statistically focused survey. The online survey has received over 1,600 responses. Responses are consistent with overall demographics of our community and the nature of responses are consistent with the Resident Experience and Priorities telephone survey. Respondents identified the most important issues facing our community as affordable housing and homelessness, environment, taxes, transit, health care, growth and sprawl, economy, government, crime and violence and transportation infrastructure/ traffic/ road maintenance.
- Additional engagement through regional planning initiatives will dive deeper into the results this year as the nature of the survey did not allow for in-depth analysis of resident opinion on specific solutions and investments. For example, deeper resident feedback will be sought through the development of the Plan to End Chronic Homelessness and the Grand River Transit Business Plan.
- Several actions were taken to ensure that opportunities were available to residents who often face barriers to participation. The Engage WR site and online survey were enabled with a translation feature. Both the telephone survey and online survey offered access to telephone based translations services if desired. Translations of the top local languages were offered for instructions on the EngageWR site and on the promotional video. Communications were sent out through community networks and connections to ensure a broader reach. Finally, an option was provided for staff to go out to community meetings or settings.

- Opportunities to speak at Council Public Input Sessions were promoted via social media, newsletters, Engage WR and newspaper ads in local outlets.

5. Background:

The Region's 2023 plan and budget process is guided by the 2019-2023 Strategic Plan. Each year the organization undergoes a comprehensive planning and budget process to calibrate its strategic initiatives and work-plans to redirect resources to priority areas.

The community engagement and communications approach for 2023 builds on last year's plan [COR-CFN-21-34/CAO-SPL-21-01]. The approach this year has surpassed engagement from prior years.

Municipalities across the province are facing significant budget challenges. The Region's 2023 budget must balance expanding important services for our growing community, and rising costs caused by inflation. It has been critical that Council is informed by a full range of community voices as they deliberate on the 2023 Plan and Budget. A fulsome communications and engagement plan has been implemented which included:

- A robust, randomized Resident Experience and Priorities telephone survey that aimed to reach 1,000 households across the Region to ensure a statistically representative sample.
- An [online page](#) was created on the Region's EngageWR site where the public can learn more about public meetings, complete an online survey, submit a question or request a community conversation.

These engagement opportunities were advertised with a comprehensive communications plan through:

- Region of Waterloo website communications
- News releases and media engagement
- Social media messaging
- YouTube video that highlights the story of the Plan and Budget
- Emails to stakeholders
- Email to over 9,000 registered users of Engage Region of Waterloo

6. Area Municipality Communication and Public/Stakeholder Engagement:

Area Municipality Communication:

Area municipalities were included the engagement opportunities available to the community.

Public/Stakeholder Engagement:

The 2023 Plan and Budget Community Engagement and Communications strategy has provided meaningful opportunities for residents, businesses and partners to inform

priorities for focus and improvement. The plan has built on and exceeded overall engagement that was accomplished last year. Specific steps were taken using an equity lens to enhance communications and engagement with community members facing the most barriers to participation.

7. Financial Implications:

The resident experience survey was funded through the Audit and Accountability Fund, which is 100% provincially funded, as a foundational element to support the development of the Region's Digital Service Strategy at a cost of \$55,200.00 plus applicable taxes. Other engagement costs related to social media promotion and translation were included in approved 2022 departmental budgets.

8. Conclusion / Next Steps:

Annual Plan and Budget engagement has now closed. The summary of feedback heard and summarized in this report will be posted on the website and on the EngageWR site. Budget approval is scheduled to take place on February 22nd, 2023.

Attachments:

Appendix A: 2023 Plan and Budget Engagement Overview Presentation

Appendix B: Resident Experience and Priorities Survey Results

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