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Date March 20, 2025 **Report No.** 2025-152

To Chair and Members
Public Consultation Task Force

From Maria Visocchi
Director, Communications, Community Engagement and Customer Service

1.0 Type of Report

Consent Item

Item For Consideration

2.0 Topic **Strengthening Community Engagement – Community Consultation Campaign Findings [Financial Impact - None]**

3.0 Recommendation

- A. THAT Staff Report, titled “Strengthening Community Engagement – Community Consultation Campaign Findings [Financial Impact – None] BE RECEIVED; and
- B. THAT Staff be directed to update the City of Brantford Community Involvement Framework based on the “Strengthening Community Consultation” campaign public input findings; and
- C. THAT Staff be directed to report back to the Task Force with a recommended Community Involvement Framework update in May 2025.

4.0 Background

Brantford City Council directed the establishment of a Public Consultation Task Force to develop a comprehensive protocol empowering the public to provide input during City considerations of the sale of significant City assets.

At their meeting held March 4, 2024, the Public Consultation Task Force directed THAT the following tasks regarding the completion of the Committee's mandate BE APPROVED:

- Design and execute a public consultation plan including public hearing formats (in person) and digital platforms;
- Explore technologies to effectively communicate and receive input to better inform residents what initiatives are occurring at City Hall beyond what staff are currently doing;
- Consider making use of information inserts in utility bills and comment cards to address concerns investigating the most effective way for each age demographic;
- Investigate ways to better utilize the information gathered from the public to inform Council decisions;
- Investigate ways to enhance public participation from those who don't normally participate;
- Utilize methodologies of gathering information including the use of professional polling data;
- Investigate public consultation thresholds including, but not limited to, a referendum on the next election ballot;
- Look into communications campaigns based on various demographics (age, language, ethnicities).

At their meeting held November 27, 2024, the Task Force directed staff to report back on the findings of the "Strengthening Community Engagement Community Consultation Campaign."

5.0 Analysis

5.1 Strengthening Community Engagement Community Consultation Campaign Findings

5.1.1 Let's talk about strengthening community engagement online survey

The “Strengthening Community Engagement Community Consultation Campaign” survey focused on gathering feedback regarding what formats are most desired, and what new methods the City can employ to enhance public participation from underrepresented groups. The survey was open from December 7, 2024 until March 7, 2025. 695 people visited the project page and 439 people completed the survey.

The “Let's Talk About Strengthening Community Engagement” survey results highlight several key trends in community engagement. Most participants fell within the 35–54 and 55–74 age groups. A significant portion of respondents (71.5%) had previously participated in city engagement activities, with online surveys being the most common method of involvement.

When it comes to receiving information about City initiatives and engagement opportunities, email newsletters were the most preferred channel among participants. Many online respondents also said they rely on the City's social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, while fewer people preferred traditional methods like newspapers, or direct mail. These results suggest that digital communication plays a critical role in reaching residents, though some groups may still rely on more traditional formats.

Among the various engagement methods offered, online surveys were the most widely used and preferred among participants. Many respondents found them convenient and accessible, allowing them to participate on their own time. Some residents also valued in-person engagement opportunities such as public meetings and focus groups, though concerns were raised about whether these forums were genuinely effective. Several participants felt that their input was not seriously considered, with

some believing that City officials had already made decisions before engaging the public.

Barriers to participation were another key theme in the survey. The most cited obstacles included a lack of time, skepticism about whether their input would make a difference, and limited awareness of engagement opportunities. Some respondents also mentioned accessibility and transportation issues, making it difficult for them to attend in-person events.

In terms of the issues that matter most, residents expressed strong interest in infrastructure projects, housing development, parks and recreation, and environmental initiatives. Concerns about City planning, traffic, and community safety were also considered as priorities.

Most contributors indicated that the main reasons people participate in engagement activities were an interest in specific topics and a desire to influence City decisions. Some respondents also mentioned that receiving a direct invitation encouraged them to get involved. To encourage greater participation, many residents suggested offering incentives such as free or discounted tickets to local events, gift cards for restaurants, or credits that could be applied toward paid City programs and services.

Despite engagement efforts offered, there was a notable degree of skepticism about whether public input truly influences decision-making. Several participants called for greater transparency, suggesting that the City should provide follow-up communication to explain how public input is used.

A detailed breakdown of the qualitative survey data can be found in **Appendix A**.

5.1.2 Let's Talk Brantford Community Consultation Booth



Figure 1 - Let's Talk Brantford Consultation Booth - February 5, 2025

Between December 2024 and March 2025, Communications and Community Engagement staff attended 12 City-hosted events and activities to maximize outreach and gather diverse in-person feedback. These events, with established audiences and a broad demographic, included the Civic Centre's Free Public Skate with Councillors Samwell and Sullivan, two Brantford Bulldogs home games, Doug Snooks 55+ programming, *Frozen in Time* and *54-40* performances at the Sanderson Centre, T.B. Costain 55+ programming, two public swims at the Wayne Gretzky Sports Centre, and two Farmers' Market visits. A gallery of photos of the LTB Engagement booth at City facilities is highlighted in **Appendix B**.

A total of 215 people were surveyed by Communications and Community Engagement staff in person. Below is a breakdown of participants' preferred communication methods to learn about engagement opportunities and preferred methods of providing input and feedback.

Preferred communication methods

- Facebook: 113
- Instagram: 58
- X: 8
- TikTok: 5
- LinkedIn: 2
- City Website: 92
- E-Newsletter/Email: 83
- Online Ads: 50
- Print Ads: 42

Preferred methods to provide input

- Online survey submissions: 135
- In-person engagement: 47
- Phone: 4
- Hybrid Public Meetings: 62

What We Heard: Resident Feedback from Event Engagement

In addition to the feedback outlined above, several residents at these events told us that their preferred method of engagement depends on the issue being discussed. Many residents feel that social media leads to information overload and is not the best platform to engage on important topics. There is strong interest in more regular meetings with Councillors and Ward Town Halls to facilitate direct and regular communication. Additionally, efforts

should be made to better reach residents aged 70 and older. Some participants suggested mailing out feedback cards that could be returned by mail to improve accessibility. There is also interest in smaller focus groups to foster more meaningful discussions.

The preferred communication methods for learning about engagement opportunities included Facebook, the City's Website, and E-Newsletters, while online surveys and hybrid public meetings were the most popular ways to provide input. General feedback highlighted a preference for direct communication, such as regular meetings with Councillors and Ward Town Halls, as well as a desire for more accessible engagement options, particularly for older residents.

Staff also noted that many attendees we approached at the Sanderson Centre shows and Bulldogs games lived out of town, particularly from the County of Brant, Cambridge or Hamilton. This is an important consideration for future engagement campaigns to ensure that any engagement efforts at events are directed to audiences made up of mostly Brantford residents.

5.1.3 Public meetings findings

As directed by the Task Force, staff promoted and hosted three public consultation meetings in different areas of the city, providing residents with the opportunity to give input on the update to the Community Involvement Framework and offer feedback on the protocol for public engagement in decisions regarding the disposition of City assets. To ensure accessibility, the meetings were scheduled at various times, including a daytime, weekend, and evening option: Thursday, January 30, from 4:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. at Woodman Community Centre, Saturday, February 1st from 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. at Brantford City Hall Council Chambers, with in-person and virtual attendance options; and Thursday, March 6, from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. at Wayne Gretzky Sports Centre.

**5.1.3.1 January 30, 2025 – Woodman Community Centre
1 attendee**

At the January 30 meeting, the discussion centered on disappointment over low attendance at the meeting and a desire for more transparency regarding how resident feedback is used. The attendee expressed frustration about the lack of clarity on whether their input influences Council decisions. There was also a suggestion that the City should hold a series of mandatory public meetings whenever a major investment, such as the Sports and Entertainment Centre (SEC), is being considered.

**5.1.3.2 February 1, 2025 – Brantford City Hall
6 attendees in person, 4 online**

During the Saturday February 1 meeting, residents raised concerns about the broader accessibility of City communications, particularly regarding newsletters and online engagement platforms like Let's Talk Brantford, expressing that non-digital opportunities should also be offered. While City representatives highlighted existing communication channels, some residents felt that participation in online engagement remained too low and that more people needed to be informed. Frustration was also expressed about the difficulty of reaching Councillors, with some attendees sharing personal experiences of emails going unanswered for months.

The discussion also touched on the challenges of public engagement, with one resident emphasizing the need for more in-person opportunities and another calling for better transparency around how City decisions are made. Specific concerns were raised about past decisions, such as the sale of Arrowdale and the implementation of the Smart Water Meter program, with some residents feeling that these initiatives lacked sufficient public consultation. There was a consensus that the City could improve how it communicates decisions, with suggestions including the use of plain-language summaries of Council decisions and greater efforts to ensure residents know when important issues are being discussed on Council agendas.

5.1.3.3 March 6, 2025 – Wayne Gretzky Sports Centre 13 attendees

The March 6 meeting focused heavily on concerns about the proposed SEC, with some residents advocating for a public referendum before the project moves forward. Others questioned whether the SEC should be a priority, particularly given other pressing community needs such as hospital improvements, social services, and infrastructure maintenance. There was also frustration about the process of public engagement itself, with some residents struggling to register as delegates to Council meetings in time and feeling that Council agendas were not available early enough to allow proper preparation. Beyond the SEC, residents voiced concerns about local service issues, such as tree maintenance, sidewalk repairs, and parking availability. There were also calls for the City to provide more frequent and accessible updates on decision-making, with some attendees suggesting the increased use of social media reels, text message notifications, and podcasts as alternative methods of engagement.

Common Themes

Across all three in person public meetings, several common themes emerged. Residents consistently expressed a need for clearer and more accessible communication from the City, with many emphasizing that engagement efforts should reach both tech-savvy individuals and those who rely on print materials. There was also a recurring sense of skepticism in the public engagement process, with some feeling that their input was not being taken seriously enough or incorporated into decision-making. Many in-person meeting attendees voiced a preference for more in-person meetings and informal engagement opportunities, as well as alternative communication methods that would make it easier to stay informed. Concerns about the SEC's financial sustainability and its prioritization over other community needs were raised multiple times, alongside requests that Councillors host more Ward meetings on a regular basis.

These discussions highlighted a broader desire for a more transparent and responsive engagement process that ensures residents feel heard and valued in shaping the City's decisions.

5.1.4 Brantford 2050 Vision - Research Panel findings

Leveraging the research panel from the Brantford 2050 Vision Engagement campaign offered a cost-effective way to gather targeted insights on residents' information and engagement preferences.

Based on the research findings of a survey among the Brantford 2050 Research Panel, those surveyed primarily rely on the City's website to access City information, though social media and online news are also widely used. Findings also revealed that engagement methods vary by age, with younger residents being far less likely to attend public meetings offered by the City. For information on recreation, cultural, sports, and other activities, participants surveyed use a mix of online and offline sources, but feedback indicates that the City's current communication methods could be expanded to reach more demographic groups.

To improve accessibility of the City's websites, residents suggested better organization of content, increased awareness of available resources, and more consistent promotion of events across platforms like email, print media, social media, and community calendars. Additional recommendations include using radio announcements, direct mail, and a centralized hub for community news. Many participants also struggle to remember to check for City updates, highlighting the need for proactive and timely communication through direct emails, text messages, printed materials in key locations, and more public meetings. Residents also emphasized the importance of greater transparency, particularly regarding financial reporting and decision-making, to foster trust and engagement with the City.

Specific quantitative data detailing these findings can be found in **Appendix C**.

5.1.5 Intent versus attendance

While attendees at in-person engagement events expressed a desire for more face-to-face meetings, the actual turnout at public consultation sessions offered as part of this campaign suggests a different reality. Despite efforts to provide various accessible in-person opportunities, attendance remained low, with only one participant at the first meeting and fewer than 15 at the most attended session. This pattern, compared with recent past attendance at City public meetings indicates that in-person participation tends to be higher when residents feel strongly about a specific issue particularly when they are dissatisfied or in opposition. For example, the March 6 meeting that saw the highest turnout was meant to focus on public engagement, but a large portion of the meeting was spent discussing concerns about the Sports and Entertainment Centre, reinforcing the idea that people are more likely to attend in-person meetings when they wish to voice objections rather than engage in general discussions about public involvement.

Furthermore, data from the City's Facebook meeting event advertisements further illustrates the disparity between online engagement and actual attendance. While boosted Facebook ads were viewed by over 11,000 people, and dozens expressed interest in attending each of the meetings, the number of residents who ultimately participated in person remained low. This trend highlights the challenge of converting digital interest into physical presence and suggests that online engagement tools may be a more effective means of gathering public input in certain contexts. These observations highlight the need to balance engagement methods, ensuring accessibility while recognizing that in-person participation may not always reflect broad community sentiment.

6.0 Financial Implications

There are no financial implications associated with this report.

7.0 Climate and Environmental Implications

There are no climate and environmental implications associated with this report.

8.0 Conclusion

Based on the findings of the Strengthening Community Engagement Community Consultation campaign, the City's Community Involvement Framework will be updated to include guidelines on enhancing accessibility, transparency, and participation. Given that online surveys and digital engagement tools were the most preferred methods, the framework should expand the City's digital engagement platforms and improve usability on the City's Let's Talk Brantford engagement portal. However, recognizing that some residents still rely on traditional methods, the framework should also incorporate hybrid engagement strategies, including mailed feedback cards, surveys, and printed materials like utility bill inserts.

Additionally, to address concerns about whether public input genuinely influences decision-making, the City should strengthen follow-up mechanisms, such as publishing "What We Heard" reports, providing clear summaries of how feedback has shaped decisions, and improving communications and public access to Council deliberations through plain-language summaries and better promotion of meeting notices.

In-person engagement options should also be expanded, as residents expressed a preference for more direct interaction with Councillors through Ward Town Halls and informal community discussions. While attendance at public consultation meetings was low, targeted outreach strategies are suggested to help engage different demographics, particularly youth, seniors, and underrepresented communities. This could involve working with community organizations such as Neighbourhood Associations and leveraging cultural events.

The framework will also include ways to incentivize participation, such as offering free event tickets or City programming credits. Furthermore, there is a need to revisit public consultation thresholds, ensuring that major decisions such as large-scale investments require mandatory public meetings. These updates will align the Community Involvement Framework with current community needs and expectations, fostering a more inclusive, transparent, and responsive approach to public engagement. Further details and implementation strategies will be outlined in the next staff report to the Task Force, detailing updates to the City's Community Involvement Framework.



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Attachments

- **Appendix A – Let’s Talk Brantford Strengthening Community Engagement Survey Findings**
- **Appendix B – Let’s Talk Brantford – Event Consultation Booths Photo Gallery**
- **Appendix C – Brantford 2050 Research Panel Survey Findings**

In adopting this report, is a by-law or agreement required? If so, it should be referenced in the recommendation section.

By-law required yes no

Agreement(s) or other documents to be signed by Mayor and/or City Clerk yes no

Is the necessary by-law or agreement being sent concurrently to Council? yes no