



RESORT MUNICIPALITY OF WHISTLER

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STAFF REPORT TO COUNCIL

PRESENTED: April 18, 2023 **REPORT:** 23-047
FROM: Legislative Services **FILE:** 3710-01
SUBJECT: COUNCIL MEETING PUBLIC QUESTION AND ANSWER PERIOD

RECOMMENDATION FROM THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

That the recommendation of the General Manager of Corporate Services and Public Safety be endorsed.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

That Council approve the implementation of a six-month pilot project for the Public Comment and Question Period during Regular Council Meetings with the following parameters:

- a. Continue to have the public comment and question period at the beginning of the meeting;
- b. Expand to allow the public to make comments as well as ask questions;
- c. Reduce the time limit for each speaker from 5 to 3 minutes;
- d. Request speakers to sign up to speak in advance of the meeting online or in person before the meeting begins including their name, topic and, if applicable, question(s);
- e. Restrict speaker's questions or comments to agenda topics only, including agenda topics from the prior two meetings;
- f. The order of speakers will respect the order of sign up;
- g. The overall time allocated to this agenda item be limited to up to 30 minutes; and
- h. Allow the Chair the discretion to extend the time limit; and further

That Council direct staff to return to Council with a report at the end of the pilot period, to provide feedback on the pilot and to decide on the permanent Public Comment and Question Period procedure.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report provides the background and rationale to seek Council's consideration and approval of a pilot project to modify the current Public Question and Answer Period (Q&A Period) during Regular Council Meetings with the goal to ensure the most effective process is in place for this format, while growing awareness of other avenues for providing feedback and asking questions of the organization.

Information Report

Administrative Report (Decision or Direction)

DISCUSSION

Background

Whistler and the Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) have a long history of meaningful dialogue and engagement with and within the community. Consultation and participation are the cornerstones of modern democracy, and municipalities have a unique role in creating these opportunities.

There are many forms of communications and engagement within the RMOW operational model. These range from participation on council committees, community open houses and an online engagement platform, to surveys, newsletters, and social media. More formalized legislative processes such as Public Hearings and Regular Council Meetings also provide opportunities for community input.

The review and refinement of these practices is ongoing as community and organizational needs evolve, and technology advances. Ensuring appropriate practices are in place is an ongoing activity for staff, and since 2019 has also been a specific focus of the Governance and Ethics Committee of Council. Community Engagement has been identified as a Strategic Priority of this term of Council allowing for a greater focus on this important area at a critical post-pandemic period for the community.

While the Council Meeting practices of the Q&A Period and written correspondence to Council have generally provided an acceptable format, feedback from members of the public as well as from municipal staff and Council have indicated that it would be worthwhile to consider refinements to the Q&A Period approach with the overall objective to improve effectiveness and productivity for everyone involved.

The Governance and Ethics Committee of Council discussed and provided a recommendation regarding this topic at its March 2023 meeting, and since then further discussion and input has occurred. This report serves to review the topic and provide input for Council's consideration.

Analysis

Current practice

The RMOW [Consolidated Council Procedure Bylaw No. 2207, 2018](#) allows for a Q&A Period to take place during Regular Council Meetings. This portion of the meeting falls in the early portion of the agenda after Presentations and Delegations and before the Mayor's Report.

Historically, this agenda item fell at the end of the meeting. This was changed to the current, earlier position on the agenda more than a decade ago to make the Q&A Period more accessible.

The parameters of the current Q&A Period are as follows:

- Members of the public may ask a question on any topic
- Only questions are allowed, no comments
- The time limit for each speaker to pose their question is five minutes
- There is no set limit for the number of speakers or the length of the Public Q&A Period
- Speakers are required to state their name and address/neighbourhood
- There is no requirement or opportunity to register in advance or at the meeting
- The opportunity for a speaker to ask further questions is at the discretion of the Chair

When taken on average, one to two questions are asked per meeting. However, what has been observed, is there are either few to no questions asked, or there is a huge community turnout on a

specific topic. In 2021, the number of questions related to an agenda item was 20% (13) and the remaining 48 questions were unrelated. In 2022, 44% (25) of the questions were related to the agenda and the remaining 32 were not. This number was significantly skewed by one meeting where 22 questions were related to one agenda item (Northlands redevelopment).

While the advantages of the current system are that it is an easy format to understand, and it is accessible given there is no advance planning required and any topic is accepted, the timing and outcome may be unpredictable for the speaker and RMOW, causing potential disappointment.

Under the current system, the number of speakers is not known until the Q&A Period agenda item, so speakers are not clear of who else will speak or in what order. As well, because there are no parameters around the subject matter of a question or opportunity to share this in advance, there is a higher likelihood that the Mayor and staff will not have the information readily available to provide a complete response, depending on the question posed. There is also no set time limit for this agenda item resulting in an inability to plan effectively for the broader agenda consideration process.

The current format also requires the community member to ask a question when staff have observed that many people just want to make a comment to Council.

It is important to note that in addition to the Public Q&A Period, there is a written correspondence practice that allows members of the public to write to Mayor and Council and have the letter included in the Council package on any topic. To be included on a Council Agenda, a letter must be received by the Wednesday preceding the meeting. Correspondence that relates to an agenda item can be received until 3:30 p.m. on the day of Regular Council meeting and added to the agenda as late correspondence. By writing to Mayor and Council, this ensures the author that the letter will be considered before the meeting by the Mayor, Council and staff. Often the letters are discussed by Council, and staff may provide more information during the meeting. When that letter is referred to staff, the letter writer will also receive a confirmation that their letter has been considered by Council and shared directly with staff.

Further, it is important to consider that the purpose of the Q&A Period is not to be the sole way for members of the public to ask questions of, or engage with, Council and the organization. It is one of various forums and methods. The Q&A Period is most suited to address matters associated with current business of Council, while questions or discussions regarding other topics may be better addressed through other avenues. Enhancing the awareness in the community of the various ways of engaging with the organization may be worthwhile to complement this pilot project.

BC Municipalities Survey

To seek general context regarding best practices for public participation in Council meetings, the Legislative Services Department surveyed 50 British Columbia municipalities through the Corporate Officer's Network.

Feedback was received from 30 municipalities regarding several aspects of their processes for public submissions during Regular Council Meetings.

The results of the survey were mixed and there is no single clear best practice for public submissions during Council meetings. Some of the key findings include:

- 73% (22) allowed for in-person questions and/or comments during meetings, with (8) communities not allowing in-person questions at all;
- 13% (3) of those allowing submissions required people to sign in or register in advance of the meeting;
- 54% (12) of those allowing submissions required it be related to the meeting agenda
- The location of public submissions on the agenda was varied, including near the beginning or at end of the meeting, and in some cases questions about a specific topic were allowed following the staff presentation. Most communities allowing questions from the public provided that opportunity at the end of the meetings.

Governance and Ethics Standing Committee of Council input

At the March 6, 2023 meeting, the Governance and Ethics Standing Committee of Council discussed this matter, considered research and recommendations from staff and put forward the following resolution for Council's consideration:

That the GAESC recommend to Council the following changes for the Council Meeting Q&A as a pilot project:

1. Allow the public to make comments as well as questions;
2. Reduce the time limit for each speaker from 5 to 3 minutes and include a clock on the lectern to assist the speaker in time management;
3. Restrict speakers to asking questions or making comments to agenda topics only;
4. Continue to have the public comment and question period at the beginning of the meeting;
5. Require people to sign up to speak in advance of the meeting or at the meeting; and
6. Allow the Chair the discretion to determine if there will be a time limit for the public comment and question period at a meeting.

Since this resolution was put forward some additional comments have been received from members of the public and as such further review and consideration of the approach has been undertaken. This is reflected in the staff recommendations presented in this report.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Relevant Council Authority/Previous Decisions

Council Procedure Bylaw

The [Consolidated Council Procedure Bylaw No. 2207, 2018](#) is a bylaw to govern meetings of the Council of the RMOW and its Committees. The Public Q&A Period is included as a regular agenda item for regular council meetings.

2023-2026 Strategic Plan

The 2023-2026 Strategic Plan outlines the high-level direction of the Resort Municipality of Whistler to help shape community progress during this term of Council. The Strategic Plan contains four priority areas with various associated initiatives that support them. This section identifies how this report links to the Strategic Plan.

Strategic Priorities

Housing

Expedite the delivery of and longer-term planning for employee housing

Climate Action

Mobilize municipal resources toward the implementation of the Big Moves Climate Action Plan

Community Engagement

Strive to connect locals to each other and to the RMOW

Smart Tourism

Preserve and protect Whistler's unique culture, natural assets and infrastructure

Not Applicable

Aligns with core municipal work that falls outside the strategic priorities but improves, maintains, updates and/or protects existing and essential community infrastructure or programs

The provision of an effective method for members of the public to provide submissions in the form of questions or comments to the RMOW during Regular Council meetings is aligned with the Engagement priority. It is one of many touchpoints for communications and engagement with the organization.

Community Vision and Official Community Plan

The Official Community Plan (OCP) is the RMOW's most important guiding document that sets the community vision and long-term community direction. This section identifies how this report applies to the OCP.

Whilst effective engagement touches many areas of moving toward our shared community vision in some way, the characteristics of the vision most pertinent to engagement work are the following:

- **Conduct:** Everyone is treated with fairness, respect and care, and as a result we enjoy high levels of mutual trust and safety.
- **Participation:** We are able to meaningfully participate in community decisions, collaborating to achieve our Community Vision.
- **Partnerships:** We have established strong partnerships with the Squamish Nation, Lil'wat Nation, other levels of government and community stakeholders based on open dialogue, honesty, respect and collaboration, resulting in the achievement of mutual goals and shared benefits.

Further, the Health, Safety and Well-being chapter of the OCP (Chapter 8) focuses on ensuring Whistler has strong community connections and social fabric—that Whistler is inclusive and affordable, and we enjoy high levels of trust, community engagement and good governance. The following OCP goal, objective and policies provide direction related to community engagement:

- **Goal:** Provide and support meaningful opportunities for community engagement.
- **Objective:** Encourage community engagement at all levels, from volunteerism to participation in municipal initiatives.
- **Policy:** Provide appropriate and meaningful opportunities for community and partner engagement in policy-making and other decisions where relevant and appropriate.
- **Policy:** Encourage greater diversity in municipally-led engagement initiatives, considering a variety of ways to engage diverse community stakeholders.

BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS

There are no budget considerations associated with this report.

LÍLWAT NATION & SQUAMISH NATION CONSIDERATIONS

The RMOW is committed to working with the Lílwat People, known in their language as *L'il'wat7úl* and the Squamish People, known in their language as the *Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumixw* to: create an enduring relationship; establish collaborative processes for Crown land planning; achieve mutual objectives; and enable participation in Whistler's resort economy.

There are no specific considerations to include in this report.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Level of community engagement commitment for this project:

Inform Consult Involve Collaborate Empower

The very nature of this work is community engagement and consultation oriented. The provision of public submissions to Regular Council meetings represents a 'consult' level by providing a venue for input and questions to the organization.

The Governance and Ethics Committee helped to initiate and guide the discussion and recommendations regarding this matter.

SUMMARY

The review and refinement of public engagement practices is an ongoing area of work for the RMOW as community and organizational needs evolve and technology advances. While this has been an ongoing focus of staff and Council through the Governance and Ethics Standing Committee, most recently Community Engagement has been identified as a strategic priority of this term of Council allowing for a greater emphasis in this important area.

There are many forms of communications and engagement within the RMOW operational model. This report provides the background and rationale to seek Council's consideration and approval of a pilot project for a refined procedure for the Q&A Period during Regular Council Meetings with the goal to ensure the most effective process is in place, while ensuring clarity and awareness of other methods of interacting with Council and the organization.

Recommended changes to the current practice would allow for both comments and questions from the public. It would also put into place a system for members of the public to sign up in advance of the

meeting online, or on site before the beginning of a Council meeting. The time allowed for each question or comment would be reduced from five to three minutes, and this portion of the agenda would be assigned up to 30 minutes but could be extended at the discretion of the Chair. Finally, the topics for comment or question would be limited to current agenda items, or items that had been on the two previous agendas.

The benefits of this system include a more structured approach that allows more advance preparation for both members of the public and the RMOW and is expected to result in more satisfactory and real time responses for members of the public.

SIGN-OFFS

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