



RESORT MUNICIPALITY OF WHISTLER

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STAFF REPORT TO COUNCIL

PRESENTED: September 12, 2023 **REPORT:** 23-098
FROM: Community Engagement & Cultural Services **FILE:** 4710-01
SUBJECT: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT & CULTURAL SERVICES UPDATE

RECOMMENDATION FROM THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

That the recommendation of the General Manager of Community Engagement and Cultural Services be endorsed.

RECOMMENDATION(S)

That Council receive the Community Engagement & Cultural Services Update.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report provides an update to Council on the Community Engagement and Cultural Services (CECS) division's activities and developing framework related to engagement. In the spirit of engage early and often, this report shares some preliminary thinking on a path forward to evolve our engagement practices. Council's feedback and guidance is important regarding new directions that are being contemplated. Specifically, staff are looking for Council's input on the following topics:

- The working definition of engagement,
- Draft engagement purpose statement and principles, and
- Ideas for expanding Council's engagement activities in the community.

Information Report

Administrative Report (Decision or Direction)

DISCUSSION

Background

Community engagement is a critical and ongoing component of the Resort Municipality of Whistler's (RMOW) day-to-day work and there is significant skill and positive momentum to build on as we consider how to evolve our practices. Council has identified community engagement as one of the four pillars in Council's 2023-2026 Strategic Plan and this focus will support Council's other three priorities – climate action, smart tourism, and housing, as all three will benefit from the knowledge, lived experience, and insights of members of the Whistler community.

When the Whistler Sessions scenario planning team looked 15 to 20 years into the future, the social issues connected to affordability challenges came into focus. There exists a real potential that as housing and affordability challenges increase, so does division and fracturing within the community fabric. If this community fabric begins to come apart, the rich Whistler culture that locals contribute to, and visitors seek out, will start to dissolve. Community engagement is one of the best ways to guard against division through building and strengthening connections between the RMOW and residents as well as between residents themselves.

For these reasons, RMOW Council and staff have identified Community Engagement as an important priority to evolve and improve during the four years of the Council term. Initiatives identified to support this priority include expanded communication channels, development of content aimed at younger demographics, engagement practices that reach a broader cross-section of the community, improved real time information sharing, website updates and review of existing Council process and procedures to find opportunities for reducing barriers for input.

Analysis

As a new division in the RMOW, CECS staff have approached our learning on how to evolve our practices regarding community engagement through the following:

- Review of existing documents, policies and projects: Community Engagement Review Project Report (2020), Whistler Sessions Scenarios, Official Community Plan, Community Engagement Policy, Council Procedure Bylaw, council reports.
- Review of existing engagement practices: Observing the meeting process of Council Meetings and internal meetings, engagement events and community events.
- Individual interviews with every Council Member.
- Two focus groups with staff who participate in engagement regularly or who interact with the public regularly through their work.
- Discussions with local leaders in the non-profit and business sectors.

Through the document review it is important to note that we have completed most action items on the Community Engagement Review Project and any outstanding items are being considered as we build out the CECS 2024 budget. Whistler Sessions sets a new tone in terms of the RMOW's desire to innovate and engage citizens in new and bold ways. This work will continue in 2024. The meeting and policy review highlighted some areas for improvement, for example developing how we use Committee of the Whole (COTW) as a forum for early engagement with Council and the community on critical topics and rethinking our Council report structure to make it easier for citizens to read them and identify the key pieces of information.

The interviews with Council were helpful to understand the varying perspectives on what engagement is, what contributes to its success, the role of mayor and council in community engagement, how engagement feedback is presented, and examples Council members have seen of engagement done well and where it could have been better.

The focus groups with staff looked at individual perspectives and feelings about engagement, what is at play when we do it well and what occurs when we have fallen short, and the experience and work of summarizing and bringing engagement feedback to Council.

Meetings with external non-profit and other community partners have started to help CECS staff understand their experience of our engagement practices. It is still early days in this external outreach and therefore too early for this report to accurately reflect any new insights in this regard as there is work to be done to build our understanding of where we can improve.

Staff's goal in this work is to help the organization, as well as Council, reach our mutual objective – which is an engaged and connected citizenry that is well informed, has easy access to the information it needs, and can provide timely input on key decisions. Through CECS's work with staff and the community, we want to:

- Find agreement on what engagement is,
- Establish a set of engagement principles to guide our engagement work,
- Evolve and try new engagement practices and diversify our approach and outreach to make it easier for a broader segment of our population to engage with us, and
- Open further opportunities for this Council to connect with community members more regularly.

What is Engagement?

The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) defines engagement as:

“Any process that involves the public in problem-solving or decision-making and that uses public input to make better decisions.”

This definition is accurate when we consider the public's role in informing our decisions. However, there is benefit as a local government to broadening how we define engagement. It is important to consider that engagement is also strengthened when we consider:

- How we engage and speak with each other within the RMOW
- How we greet people inside and outside the organization
- Our day-to-day interactions with the public and community stakeholders in person and on the phone
- Our communication's “tone” and “relatability”
- Accessibility of information, our engagement material, and events
- The physical space we work in – is it accessible, inviting, safe and does it reflect our values?
- The physical and online spaces we create in which to engage with others – are they accessible, inviting, safe and do they reflect our values?

In essence, staff have chosen a broad definition of engagement because every interaction is an opportunity for engagement and therefore influences our ability to connect our community to each other and to the RMOW.

The Development of Principles to Guide Engagement

Dee Hock was the founder of Visa. He felt that for an organization to be nimble and successful it should be relatively invisible. He guided the company on what he called The Hock Principle. The Hock Principle is this: *Simple, clear purpose and principles give rise to complex and intelligent behaviour. Complex rules and regulations give rise to simple and stupid behaviour.*

The power of working from a clear set of principles instead of a “rule book” or lengthy guidelines is that it provides more opportunity for staff to be nimble and innovative. It enables new thinking and the freedom to pilot new methods, while keeping everyone moving in the same direction. However, new ideas and methods of engagement come with a level of risk and therefore requires staff, Council and the community to approach this work with a deep commitment to continuous improvement. We will fall short at times and in those moments staff and Council must seek to understand what worked well, what didn't work, and make changes as required.

Developing a purpose statement for our engagement practices and a set of design principles to guide behaviour takes time and is an iterative process. Below is an early draft of our engagement purpose statement and the principles we are discussing internally. To generate discussion and understanding, we have described each one by what it is and what it isn't. Staff's goal is to eventually produce something brief and simple to guide our engagement design practices.

Purpose of Engagement

We seek to strengthen community connection and resilience by hosting conversations that matter and draw on Whistler's collective know-how and experience to help inform decisions that consider the past, present, and future.

Engagement Design Principles

- **Host and connect**
 - We extend invitations and see ourselves as hosts, and connectors of people and ideas.
 - We set aside strict formality and unchanging methods of engagement.
- **Listen with curiosity**
 - We prioritize “pulling in information”, respecting collective experience and know how, and asking good questions.
 - We set aside judgement and being right.
- **Bravery and belief**
 - We have the courage to try new things, continuously improve and believe that people are well intentioned.
 - We set aside avoidance.
- **Create choice and agency**

- We give citizens choice on when and how they want to participate and ensure they know how their feedback informs the decision-making process.
- We set aside a “one size fits all” approach.
- **Actively seek a diversity of input**
 - We work with community partners to bring diverse voices into our process early and host them safely.
 - We set aside relying on just the people who show up.
- **Use the right size of process, with the right people, at the right time**
 - We follow the IAP2 core values and use time and resources wisely to collaborate and plan.
 - We set aside feeding into a cycle of hope and then cynicism* by mismatching the process to the decision at hand.

**When we ask questions seeking input on big vision and big change, but in fact only have the budget, time and resources to effect small changes in the short to medium term. Our questions, in these circumstances, create a public sense of hope and optimism, which we can't deliver on quickly, resulting in the opposite impact and creating public cynicism.*

This new framework is a small example of how we are trying new things. It is important that our engagement work invites the public to weigh in and we want to do some of this work in the public domain and give the community time to ponder these ideas alongside us. We expect these initial engagement design principles to evolve and change as we discuss them with stakeholders and test them in the field with each new engagement opportunity.

Innovating and Broadening Opportunities

Staff and Council want to see innovation on our engagement channels and have more opportunities to engage with a broader segment of the community. Finding new ways to reach and engage with the community has already begun. Some examples include:

- Whistler Sessions – this work continues to use the scenarios in our own work, but also in finding more ways to continuously engage the community in shaping the future of Whistler. Whistler Sessions was highlighted at TedX Whistler and Arts Whistler will be using the Sessions Scenarios to inspire different forms of art.
- The Communications team is using analytics and is achieving a more engaging and relatable tone to increase engagement on our social media channels. For example, comparing May to August 2022, to the same period in 2023, our monthly growth rate on Facebook is up 30% and on Instagram is up 120%.
- Communications has also launched a [blog](#). The goal behind the blog is to create a place to tell timely stories and provide timely updates and create a connection between our short social media posts, which then link to a blog post to add context, which then links to a whistler.ca page with additional information.

- The Communications team will be taking some internal field trips to better understand the work our teams do to keep our town running. Their goal is to find new ways to tell our story and connect the community to the services we deliver and the people delivering them.
- The Finance team has initiated an early budget engagement process to help inform staff and Council's budgeting process. The survey can be found [here](#).
- The library hosted "Fire Season – Collective Sense Making Around Wildfires," prompting thinking about this important public safety issue through the arts and community conversation.
- Council and the community would have seen pop-up engagement locations throughout Whistler at municipal and non-municipal facilities.
- The Recreation Team is working on their own Facebook page which will be launching soon.
- QR code stickers and signage are being used at our facilities to collect feedback in the moment from citizens and visitors.

The team is also looking at ways to broaden access to Council and provide opportunities outside of and within specific policy or project engagement for Council to spend more time listening and interacting with members of the community. Some ideas for consideration include:

- Coffee with Council – in partnership with local non-profit organizations, setting up small group gatherings with the diverse members of our community who are often under-represented in our public engagement process for a variety of reasons.
- Provide opportunities within large engagement projects (e.g., Active Transportation Master Plan, Parks Master Plan, Long Term Housing Strategy), for Council to be part of the engagement process. Both in large settings and in smaller group conversations.
- Combine learning and listening. For example, an evening of education about an aspect of our climate plan or emergency management plan followed by a panel (including members of Council) discussion and opportunities for the public to ask questions and share their thoughts with staff and Council.
- Use local government awareness week to get Council members into schools with kids of all ages to talk about what we do and create opportunities for the community to see behind the scenes of our operations.
- Create a pathway for teachers or Student Councils to request a staff or Council member to engage with students on a particular topic.
- Build branded, portable pop-up engagement booth for Famer's Market, and Olympic Plaza events.
- Youth takeover of social media channels to elevate their voice and to highlight their ideas.
- Council walk and talks – opportunities for Council members to meet with individuals or with a small group to walk and talk about ideas, issues, or opportunities.

Council's Decision-Making Role

Finally, as decision-makers, Council plays an important role in the public engagement process. Before we finalize significant engagement plans, we'll need to know:

- What information Council is looking to receive through the engagement process to inform their decision-making,
- That Council agrees with the identified list of impacted stakeholders we need to reach,
- If Council is comfortable with the opportunities staff have planned that will include their participation, and
- That Council understands the timing and frequency of when staff will return with updates and information on what we're hearing and learning along the way.

The engagement design principle described above states, "Use the right size of process, with the right people, at the right time." As per our Engagement Policy, this doesn't mean that staff will engage deeply on every topic or decision that comes to Council, nor that all engagement plans will come before Council for review. But it does mean that where we are going to engage with the community more deeply on large engagement efforts, that all of Council has a role in informing and approving our engagement strategy. We believe an effective process for significant engagement projects - where community interest is expected to be high and where involving and collaborating with the public would be beneficial - would look something like the following:

1. Staff develop an initial engagement plan either in-house or with support of an external consultant.

The plan would include the data staff will collect from policy, best practice, the public, and subject matter experts, to ensure that the information creates a complete picture on which Council can base its decision. The plan will also indicate opportunities for Council involvement as well as a timeline for updates to Council and the community through our COTW and Regular Meeting process.

2. Staff present their plan for feedback to a Community Engagement Working Group*

This proposed working group would include members of the community who have expertise in engagement, knowledge of accessibility issues, represent a broad community demographic that may not always come to RMOW engagement events today, and representatives from groups with lived experience that can contribute to the policy/project we're working on. They would work at the operational level with staff to review engagement plans and provide staff with timely input on engagement timelines, methods, data gathering, and evaluation.

3. Staff update their engagement plan and bring it to Council for discussion and input.

At this stage all of Council brings their strategic lens and diverse perspectives to review the engagement plan and ensure the right stakeholders are being engaged, that the information being collected will support their decision-making, that any political considerations are identified, and that they understand their involvement in the process and timelines for updates to Council and the public.

4. Council participates in the engagement process as planned.

In some instances, there will be events within the plan that will directly involve Council in the engagement process. Most large engagement plans will also have updates to Council through the COTW or Regular Meeting process to highlight what we have heard and next steps.

5. Engagement process concludes.

Once the engagement process concludes, staff will complete their work to bring forward a recommendation to Council. Many considerations and inputs go into a staff recommendation to Council, including: our OCP and existing policy, best practice, their professional expertise, public input, long term impacts, budget implications, etc. Public input forms one input on which staff will base their recommendation, and our promise to the public is that staff will identify how the input influenced the recommendation being brought forward.

**Community Engagement Working Group: this is proposed in the Committee Review process at the recommendation of staff and therefore does not exist at this point in time. The working group will be operational in its focus, ensuring that engagement plans will reach the identified stakeholders in an appropriate and timely way and provide staff with a community sounding board. All of Council would then apply its strategic lens to the engagement plan in Step 3, to ensure nothing is missed and that all Council perspectives are heard by staff as they finalize plans.*

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Relevant Council Authority/Previous Decisions

In February of this year the CAO presented a summary of the strategic planning outcomes which highlighted the need to focus on engagement and restructuring the organization to create the Community Engagement and Cultural Services division. This work is also supported by the Community Engagement Policy.

- [February 21, 2023: Administrative Report 23-020](#) Strategic Planning Outcomes
- [October 6, 2020: Community Engagement Review Report No. 2098](#)

2023-2026 Strategic Plan

The 2023-2026 Strategic Plan outlines the high-level direction of the RMOW 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.

Staff share Council's focus on evolving our engagement practices and expanding our communications reach. This report is to help align early thinking between Council, staff and the public.

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

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.

The early work of the CECS team to evolve engagement practices is aligned with the community vision, most specifically with the vision characteristics of Community which speak to quality of life, inclusive, connected, conduct, participation and partnerships. The OCP also references community engagement, most specifically in Section 8, which speaks to Health, Safety and Community Wellbeing. The most relevant goals are:

- 8.1. Goal Promote, encourage and support initiatives that strengthen the community's sense of place and sense of belonging.
- 8.3. Goal Strengthen opportunities for social cohesion and connectedness for residents and visitors.
- 8.4. Goal Encourage and strengthen a culture of inclusion and diversity.
- 8.5. Goal Provide and support meaningful opportunities for community engagement.
- 8.6. Goal Create and embed effective governance mechanisms and partnerships to create trust, responsibility and accountability.

BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS

There are no budget considerations at this time.

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.

Engagement with Lílwat Nation and Squamish Nation must be early, ongoing and respectful of their needs, timelines and capacity where their interests are impacted by the work of the RMOW and in alignment with our signed agreements. Staff will ensure that our engagement opportunities are open to everyone, but ensure specific opportunities are created for Lílwat Nation and Squamish Nation as required.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Level of community engagement commitment for this project:

Inform Consult Involve Collaborate Empower

Presenting the draft purpose statement and design principles at COTW is a small example of how we are trying new things. It is important that our engagement work invites the public to weigh in early and we want to do some of this work in the public domain and give the community time to ponder these ideas alongside us. We expect these initial principles to evolve and change as we discuss them with stakeholders and test them in the field with each new engagement opportunity. The Community Engagement Policy requires staff to monitor our engagement efforts and provide participants with the opportunity to not only provide input on the topic at hand, but also on the process to help staff identify opportunities for improvement.

SUMMARY

Staff highlighted three topics at the beginning of this report where Council's input would be helpful:

- The working definition of engagement,
- Draft engagement purpose statement and principles, and
- Ideas for expanding Council's engagement activities in the community.

Staff also recognize that our draft engagement purpose statement and principles will be new to the public as well. CECS staff will be talking with community partners about these ideas and will be testing them in our engagement activities and getting feedback from the public through this process in the months to come.

The path to improving and innovating on our engagement practices at the RMOW will not be a straight line. We will need room to experiment, perhaps fall short a time or two, learn and continue. We look forward to working with Council and the community to find new ways to connect and ensure that the community's know-how and experience is influencing our approach and decision-making. There is so much to be gained by engaging with our community in terms of building social cohesion and social capital. Our goal then is to use the design principle of hosting and connecting to connect our community and make us more resilient in the face of change and in our ability to weather whatever storm may come our way.

SIGN-OFFS

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