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## STAFF REPORT TO COUNCIL

**PRESENTED:** December 5, 2023  
**FROM:** Legislative Services  
**SUBJECT:** PUBLIC COMMENT AND QUESTION PILOT RESULTS

**REPORT:** 23-123  
**FILE:** 0550-20

### 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 the Public Comment and Question Period (C&Q) during Regular Council Meetings with the following parameters:

- a) Continue to have C&Q Period at the beginning of the Meeting;
- b) Expand C&Q Period to allow the public to make comments as well as ask questions;
- c) Reduce the time limit for each speaker from five to three minutes;
- d) Request speakers sign up to speak in advance of the Meeting either online or in person before the Meeting begins - including their name, agenda item and, if applicable, question(s);
- e) Restrict speaker's C&Q to agenda topics only, including agenda topics from the prior two Meetings;
- f) The order of speakers respects the order of sign up;
- g) The overall time allocated be limited to up to 30 minutes;
- h) The Chair has discretion to extend the time limit of parameters (c) and (g); and
- i) The C&Q exit survey be continued for the next 12 months.

### PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report provides the background, rationale, and results of the Public Comment and Question Period (C&Q Period) Pilot Project (Pilot Project) that modified the current Public Question and Answer (Q&A Period) during Regular Council Meetings. As a result of the findings, staff recommends permanently adopting the new parameters of the C&Q Period

☐ Information Report

☒ Administrative Report

## DISCUSSION

### **Background**

The Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) has 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 those opportunities.

The Q&A Period is a long-standing method to encourage government engagement and dialogue between the RMOW local government and its citizens. The Q&A Period had informal rules that have been followed to date. The "[Council Procedure Bylaw No. 2207, 2018](#)" (Procedure Bylaw) requires the Q&A Period to be the third agenda item during a Regular Council meeting; apart from the Procedure Bylaw, there are no other associated bylaws, policies or procedures that dictate the parameters of Q&A Period.

In April 2023, Staff suggested altering the informal parameters of the Q&A Period to address some frustrations that were occurring during this agenda item and to better allow commentary from the public. The Governance and Ethics Standing Committee of Council (GAESC) discussed and provided a recommendation regarding the Pilot Project at its [March 6, 2023 Meeting](#). Based on that recommendation, Staff presented the Pilot Project on April 19, 2023 ([Administrative Report No. 23-047](#)).

Council resolved the following at the April 19, 2023 Regular Council Meeting:

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

- a) Continue to have the public comment 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 to pose a question or make a comment from five to three 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 the 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 up to 30 minutes;
- h) Allow the Chair the discretion to extend the time limit.

The length of the Pilot Project was extended to November 21, 2023 (Pilot Project Period) to account for the break from Council Meetings that lasted from August 2 to September 11, 2023.

During the Pilot Project Period, members of the community were encouraged to complete the Council Question and Comment Period Survey (Exit Survey) following their participation in the Pilot Project. The Exit Survey posed several questions to gain a better understanding of the ability of the participant to contribute to a Regular Council Meeting, their view on whether the Pilot Project improved meeting efficiency, and any additional feedback. The Exit Survey questions are as follows:

- 1. User's residency status (permanent resident, second homeowner, out of town).
- 2. Had the user attended a Regular Council meeting in the past year?
- 3. Did the user attend the C&Q Period during the Pilot Project Period?

4. Was the process of signing up to speak online or in person before the meeting simple and accessible?
5. Was council and/or staff prepared to provide a reasoned response?
6. Is the 30 minutes allocated on the Council agenda for the C&Q period sufficient?
7. If you feel 30 minutes is not appropriate, please indicate preferred duration.
8. Does limiting questions or comments to topics to that day's agenda or two agendas prior improves efficiency?
9. Does pre-registering to speak improve meeting efficiency?
10. Was the three-minute time limit enough to articulate your question and/or comment?
11. Other ways participant had interacted with mayor and council.
12. RMOW Community Engagement used.
13. Additional feedback.

Staff have reviewed the feedback from the survey and shared the results with the GAESC with its goal to receive from GAESC feedback on whether Council should consider adopting the Pilot Project as a permanent C&Q Period.

## **Analysis**

### **Feedback**

During the Pilot Project, staff received feedback from several sources: the public completing the Exit Survey, informal feedback throughout the Pilot Project Period, as well as from the GAESC at the November 16, 2023 Meeting (the GAESC Meeting).

The table below shows the participation levels during the Pilot Project period. Following review of Regular Council Minutes, staff confirm the following levels of participation in the Pilot Project:

Individuals who signed up to speak	27
Total number of speakers	25
Individuals who spoke at regular council meetings	19
Individuals who completed the Exit Survey	9

During the Pilot Project Period, 27 individuals signed up to speak at a Regular Council Meeting. Of those 27 sign ups, a total of 25 different individuals participated during the Pilot Project period. Of the 25 individuals, two individuals participated in more than one Regular Council meeting. As a result, a total of 19 individuals participated in the Pilot Project. The meetings with the highest levels of participation occurred on May 16 and June 20 with five individual speakers respectively. On November 21, there were six three-minute comments by four individuals.

Staff compared these participation numbers with Q&A Period during 2022. In the same period during 2022 there were 34 (vs. 19 in 2023) different individuals who spoke at a Regular Council Meetings. These 2022 numbers were skewed by a single Meeting which saw unusually high participation with 27 questions asked from 23 speakers. Considering Council did not have any agenda items that initiated high participation during the Pilot Period, an appropriate comparison of the two years should be cognizant of this 2022 outlier Meeting. If the year over year comparison were to shorten the comparison period to remove to exclude outlier meeting from the 2022 comparison set, the result would be that there was a total of 11 individual speakers between May to November 2022, and 15 individual speakers during the same months of the Pilot Project Period.

## Exit Surveys

In total, nine Exit Surveys were completed during the Pilot Project Period. It is unknown whether the surveys were completed by C&Q participants because reminders to complete the Exit Survey were sent through channels such as “Whistler Today” which reaches subscribers and not solely the Pilot Project participants. Further, the Exit Survey asked whether the individual had attended a Regular Council meeting during the Pilot Project Period and two survey respondents responded in the negative. Appendix A includes a chart outlining the Exit Survey answers received based on the parameters of the Pilot Project.

There was little feedback on the timing of the C&Q Period within the Regular Council meeting agenda. One individual noted that it would be useful to ask questions before a vote on each agenda item. Staff do not recommend this approach based on feedback from other municipalities that have employed this format. Feedback from municipalities that use this format reported that it is an often ineffective and time-consuming way to receive feedback.

There was warm feedback on allowing comments as well as questions during C&Q Period. Most survey takers indicated that it was somewhat to very important to make comments except for two who rated it lower in importance. During the first Meeting in which the Pilot Project was implemented, staff and Council received direct positive feedback from the public on their ability to provide comments, rather than trying to frame their comment as a question. Anecdotally, staff noted that speakers expressed informal positive feedback about the opportunity to state a comment that did not have to be framed as a question.

There was also positive feedback on reducing the speaker’s time limit from five to three minutes. Most survey takers agreed that it was enough time to articulate their question or comment. One stated that *“accessibility by the public is critical to democracy but it’s perfectly reasonable to enforce time limits on comments.”* Staff recognizes that the time limit has resulted in succinct comments or questions from participants.

Staff note that there has been some constructive feedback regarding the new time limit. Those who disagreed that three-minutes was enough time to articulate their question, also felt that there should be more time allocated to C&Q Period overall. Most survey takers felt that the appropriate length of the C&Q Period should be until all the questions and comments have been received. Staff believe that this has been addressed in the recommendations with discretion given to the Chair to extend the C&Q Period if needed.

One participant noted clarity issues with the individual time limit. The Pilot Project did not indicate whether the three-minute limit included both the time required for the question and answer, or whether it was just for the initial question and the subsequent conversation between Mayor and the speaker was not included in the time limit. Staff notes that the three-minute time limit is intended to be for both question and answer, but that the Chair has the discretion to increase the time limit. This comment was addressed in practice, where there was a question that came close to the three-minute limit, the Chair would often engage in answering the question and allowing a follow up question. Parameters (c) and (g) of the Recommendation allow for ongoing Chair discretion in this respect.

Responses on whether the sign-up improved efficiency were generally neutral with answers ranging from ‘definitely agreed’ it improves meeting efficiency to ‘definitely disagree’. Only two survey participants answered whether the platform was accessible, one individual ‘definitely agreed’ it was accessible whereas the other ‘somewhat disagreed’. Staff recognizes that an online portal may not

reach all ages and may not be accessible and therefore recommend continuing to offer a sign-up sheet that would be available just outside the Council Chamber before each Regular Council Meeting.

Staff received the most feedback on restricting questions or comments to the current agenda including the two meetings prior. Exit Survey results spanned from 'definitely disagreeing' to 'definitely agreeing' that it improved meeting efficiency. Members of the community felt that this parameter did not give the public the opportunity to discuss issues that the RMOW might be dealing with in the near future or issues that might be of importance, but are not put to Council to consider or discuss. One commenter noted that he felt this parameter would prevent the public from holding Council accountable.

While there may be a perceived limitation in this respect, staff points out that this does not prevent members of the public from submitting correspondence to Mayor and Council on any issue which thereby becomes part of the next Council's agenda. Having C&Q Period restricted to the three most recent agendas provides staff and Council the opportunity to investigate the issue and increase the likelihood of providing a well-informed answer during the Council Meeting. In addition, this parameter ensures that the Regular Council Meeting continues to function to accomplish the business of that day.

Moreover, the C&Q period is certainly not the only way in which individuals can interact with Mayor and Council. The individuals who completed the Exit Survey had also noted the other ways in which they currently interact with Mayor and Council. This list includes:

- Direct emails;
- Phone calls;
- Submitted correspondence to Mayor and Council/staff;
- Attending Open Houses or other public meetings;
- Speaking with Mayor and Council at community events; and
- Personal meetings with Mayor and Council.

Staff did not receive any feedback on having the order of speakers be the order of sign up. We do note that the order of speakers was changed twice during the Pilot Project Period. This appeared to be both the product of the speakers requesting rearranging the order and the Chair deciding to invite a speaker up earlier in the Meeting than anticipated.

Placing an overall time limit of 30 minutes was answered with some concern by the community. The survey takers voiced concern that the C&Q Period should go on as long as it takes to answer all the questions posed. One asked how long the question period lasts and whether this rule applied only to more controversial topics. Over the Pilot Project Period, the top two meetings had five speakers each. The longest question period during the Pilot Project lasted approximately 15 minutes in total to address five speakers. Therefore, staff recognizes that the Pilot Project did not test this parameter; however, staff will continue to receive feedback from the public and can revisit this issue if necessary. The Pilot Period demonstrated that the 30 minutes was adequate for every Meeting during that period of time.

Staff received no feedback on the parameter that the Chair has the discretion to extend the time limit. The Chair has used this discretion to extend the time limit of individual speakers.

Based on the feedback to date, staff recommends adopting the parameters of the C&Q Period format. With the C&Q Period staff have been provided an opportunity to know what will be asked in advance and have some time to prepare a more complete answer for the speaker at the Council meeting. In addition, the C&Q Period does not detract from other forums in which an individual can interact with Mayor and Council.

The permanent adoption of the C&Q Period parameters does not require a formal bylaw or new policy or procedure. Instead, staff is seeking a resolution from Council to adopt the Pilot Project parameters, as well as keeping the Exit Survey open to the public so staff and Council can continue to receive feedback on the project.

#### Governance and Ethics Standing Committee of Council Input

At the November 16, 2023, the GAESC discussed this matter, considered the feedback from the public and staff, and the recommendations from staff. As a result, the GAESC passed the following resolution:

***That the Governance and Ethics Standing Committee recommend that Council endorse the current Public Comment and Question Pilot Project approach going forward.***

In addition to their endorsement, the GAESC provided valuable feedback with the suggestion to keep the Exit Survey open to the public. Staff recognizes the value in the feedback received thus far and encourages continued feedback in the future. Keeping the Exit Survey available will also allow staff to understand how the new forum works when a meeting has a longer than usual C&Q Period. The feedback received from the public will inform any adjustments staff may suggest to the C&Q Period in the future. Based on this feedback, staff have included parameter (i).

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## **POLICY CONSIDERATIONS**

### **Relevant Council Authority/Previous Decisions**

The [Procedure Bylaw](#) is the bylaw that governs 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.

[Administrative Report No. 23-047](#) – Council Meeting Public Question and Comment Period (April 18, 2023)

[March 6, 2023 – GAESC Meeting Minutes](#)

### **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.

#### **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.

Whilst effective engagement touches many areas 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, and 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 all 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.

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### **BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS**

There are no budget considerations associated with this report.

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### **LÍ'WAT NATION & SQUAMISH NATION CONSIDERATIONS**

The RMOW is committed to working with the Líl'wat 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.

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There are no specific considerations to include in this report.

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## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Level of community engagement commitment for this project:

☐ Inform    ☐ Consult    ☒ Involve    ☐ Collaborate    ☐ Empower

This body of this report speaks to the community engagement for this Pilot Project in detail.

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## REFERENCES

Appendix A – Exit Survey Feedback Table

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## SUMMARY

This report provides the background, rationale, and results of the C&Q Period Pilot Project that modified the established Q&A Period processes during Regular Council Meetings. As a result of the findings, staff recommends permanently adopting the new parameters of the C&Q Period including the new parameter that the Exit Survey continue to be available to the public so staff can continue to receive feedback on the C&Q Period.

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## SIGN-OFFS

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