



RESORT MUNICIPALITY OF WHISTLER

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STAFF REPORT TO THE COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

PRESENTED: January 21, 2025 **REPORT:** W25-001
FROM: Communications **FILE:** 4720-20
SUBJECT: WHISTLER.CA WEBSITE REDESIGN PROJECT 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 the Committee of the Whole (COTW) receive COTW Report No. W25-001 regarding the Resort Municipality of Whistler website redesign project (Redesign Project) update; and

That the COTW recommend to Council that Council endorse the Redesign Project plan as described in COTW Report No. W25-001.

PURPOSE OF REPORT

This report provides a progress update on the whistler.ca website redesign project (Redesign Project) and summary of findings from the project's public consultation and research.

DISCUSSION

Background

The Resort Municipality of Whistler (RMOW) requires a strong digital presence to serve its residents, second-home owners, visitors and businesses. Whistler.ca is the online Municipal Hall for the RMOW, providing around-the-clock information and access to online business options. Approximately 600,000 unique individuals visit the site each year, viewing the pages 1.8 million times. Unlike third-party media reports, or algorithm-manipulated social media environments, the website speaks directly to the citizenry, making it our most consistent and reliable resource to provide the plain, clear and transparent information required for good governance.

Websites demand evolution. Consistent updating of tools, content and approach is needed to remain in step with rapid technological change. The communications team is presently working on the Redesign Project to address information gaps, usability deficiencies and the overall accessibility of the RMOW's website. The work marks a shift to user-centric design and the RMOW's first comprehensive, in-depth communications research to understand what our audience wants and needs from our virtual presence.

Project scope

The overarching goal of the Redesign Project is to improve online customer service. In addition to reorganizing the navigation and page groupings of our site, this project will streamline content by removing up to 60 per cent of the pages. Streamlining the site ensures the written content presented is current, functional, and accessible. Reducing volume also increases search speed, reliability and stability while making it easier to find the most important content. Citizens will find it easier to find information and it will be easier for the RMOW to maintain the site.

It is worth mentioning, many third-party software application deficiencies were identified during the research, and information on the efficacy of each application has been collected to understand pathways for continual improvement. Corrective measures sit outside the scope of the current endeavour. The applications include:

- MyWhistler, the business software used to pay property tax, view active development applications, purchase business licences and parking passes;
- eScribe council meeting software;
- Start Date recruitment software;
- the interactive GIS map, showing layers of data and property information;
- and the Xplor recreation booking system.

Project stages

Public consultation is critical to ensure a website works for the people it is meant to serve. To ensure whistler.ca is properly assisting its audience, the decisions and improvements underway are based on, and informed by, users' feedback and experiences. The project team has collected and analyzed data in the following phases:

A. Discovery (February to September 2024)

- Interviews conducted with Council and staff to understand needs and uses
- Surveying of public website users
- Interviews with public website users selected to represent unique demographics
- Inventory of content on website
- Analysis of website data, analytics and user behaviour drawn from Google Analytics

B. Testing (October 2024)

- Prototype testing of the wireframe* drafted from discovery-phase data
- Website demographic representative testing via interview

**A wireframe is a blueprint for the website design, which provides a visual guide for the site's basic structure*

C. General community testing (October to November 2024)

- Largescale wireframe navigation testing

D. Content updates (July 2024 to January 2025)

- Review of website content and development of content redraft plan
- Content overhaul of core information sections

E. User-interface design (December 2024 to February 2025)

- User interface design and website page template creation
- Accessibility testing
- Design improvements and finalization

F. Development, website launch (December to spring 2025)

- Development and programming

- In-house testing and staff training
- Go-public product delivery via communications rollout

Gathering a range of data and taking an iterative approach to the design process is a website development best practice, and the insights provided from this Redesign Project will inform communications work and the digital strategy moving forward. The project initially targeted a one-year timeline but was expanded by three to four months to include additional community engagement. This helped ensure the initial discovery findings were properly interpreted and the designs truly performed under scrutiny.

Community input and research informing the Redesign

In the discovery phase of a user experience (UX) redesign, a UX consultant conducts a series of in-depth interviews to understand what is needed from the website by its users. Information is gathered on what users want and need, so a layout for the information can be built to suit the unique logic required. A wireframe is then created and layers of input are gathered to test the proposal.

For the Redesign Project, whistler.ca interviewed participants who were asked to identify what they like and dislike about the site and how they believe it could be improved. Three municipal staff and two members of Council gave internal feedback before six members of the public were identified to add external perspective. The members of the public who participated in interviews included a:

- resident who speaks English as a second language;
- senior;
- seasonal worker;
- representative from the building sector; and
- long-term local.

Interviewees were asked to sort the website content, so the researcher could understand typical groupings and searches for information on the site and see which words the public naturally associates with each municipal service. The nuances of how people understand and seek out information for the RMOW are unique to this environment. The goal of this stage in the research was to look at things like whether people search for “bus” or “transit” and if, when undertaking this type of search, they expect to find the information near “parking” or under a heading like “municipal services,” where items like “water infrastructure” live.

Following these in-depth interviews, the project team expanded work to a public surveying phase, looking for usage patterns and pain points identified by a broader audience. The survey had 40 responses with 75 per cent of those individuals describing themselves as long-term Whistler residents, most in the 30 to 64 age range (90 per cent). 15 per cent of the respondents shared they have a disability, including some who identify as neurodivergent, with 10 per cent saying they used assistive technology to access whistler.ca. This meant they could provide uniquely valuable input for accessibility improvements.

The last step of the discovery phase was a review of website analytics. The research looked at how people arrive at whistler.ca (traffic source), where they leave the site (exit pages and bounce rates), average times on pages and what people search. Insights like the amount of time people spend on the site — 58 seconds — and how they view the site (63 per cent on mobile) were drawn from this effort.

The initial research yielded many learnings. The team now understood the citizenry is primarily interested in website content on recreation and Meadow Park Sports Centre, Council (including

watching Council meetings and contacting Councillors), transit and parking. It also showed us that their attention was really focused on the home page. Other important insights included findings that:

- users want to engage with their community and government;
- users want it to be easier and faster to get tasks done on whistler.ca;
- information is difficult to find, and the search bar results are inaccurate;
- users find the page design cluttered and it takes too many clicks to get to an answer; and
- the users want plain language.

Overall, the research backed the communication team's main hypotheses in entering the Redesign Project. The site needs simplification and focus for audiences to grasp its content in the time they are dedicating to visiting our site. The consultant recommended evaluating pages for all audiences—citizens, visitors, second homeowners and businesses—and reducing municipal jargon with particular attention paid to plain language writing principles. Other recommendations included to:

- simplify the website's structure, improving the search and navigation
- reduce the amount of content and visual clutter
- support the actions users want to get done, rather than sharing lengthy in-depth information
- feature new content clearly and design a flexible site, adaptive to changing priorities
- make it easy to connect with the municipality and Council, attend events and Council meetings
- improve website accessibility

Wireframe Development and Refinement

Once initial research findings are complete, a UX consultant builds a prototype website, suggesting how and where to test the product for refinements. At this stage, the original six community interviewees selected for the Redesign Project tested desktop and mobile navigation logic. The consultant's proposal performed well, with users appreciating things like the more prominent search bar suggested for the home page, though there were quirks to work through. Expanding the menu options, for example, meant users were successfully locating information in the new "Mayor and Council" and "Transportation" sections, but some other choices left them struggling to find the "Fire Danger Rating." Adjustments were made.

With the first round of input and refinement done, the team took the blueprint out to a larger audience. Shared extensively on the RMOW's communication channels—Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn, the Whistler This Week e-newsletter and with municipal staff—this phase of testing assessed whether a larger audience could find key pages with ease in a simple, nine-task assignment. Of the 84 respondents who invested in completing the test, 80 per cent were able to navigate through six tasks correctly. Two navigation points required further review and refinement and one piece of data was discarded as the results were inconsistent, indicating there was confusion with the ask. A few quotes from the work included:

- "So much better, clean design, bold text, well organized hierarchy of info."
- "Vast improvement."
- "I like this way better than the dropdown menus on the previous site."
- "After one click, the pages are super easy to navigate — well done."

With this stage complete, it was time to take the black-and-white wireframe and transform it into a colourful, user-friendly, and accessible interface. Content could also be redrafted.

Content Overhaul

The Communications team is now finalizing content improvements, which means rewriting the core pages of the website. Users have very clearly shared they feel whistler.ca has an overwhelming amount of information, so minimizing volume is the primary objective. The writers are streamlining from 800 pages to the 350 mark and have recreated several priority sections in plain language. The areas receiving a substantive overhaul were identified through the survey and interview feedback, as well as an analytics analysis of where attention is focused on the site—plus direct input from subject matter experts. They include:

- recreation;
- transit and parking;
- Council;
- housing;
- Big Moves climate action;
- environmental stewardship;
- fire;
- emergency; and
- construction, building and development planning.

This content overhaul will be complete by the first week of February and remain an ongoing project, after the site launches. Content is being developed in parallel with both the refreshed design and development phases of the overall endeavour.

Design and Development

After design, the new user-centric whistler.ca will be coded. The designs are being finalized now and all work will conclude in time for the Redesign Project to go live this spring. A thorough communications plan has been developed for both internal and external rollout to ensure RMOW employees are comfortable with how their work is being presented and Whistler's citizenry understands how they can report issues they are experiencing as they try to access material. The RMOW wants to ensure work on the site is always iterative and responsive and that the public's needs are met first and foremost. This does involve a shift in approach for the organization and will involve ongoing education and discussion about the importance of plain language and user-centric design.

Next steps

Our community's online needs will continue to evolve, and it is hoped the new website will be better positioned to bend and flex to future demand through concerted focus on constantly refreshing and adapting content, structure and technology. The communications team is also reviewing feedback received on the third-party software integrated with whistler.ca and will develop plans for improvements. It is important to ensure all aspects of the online experience serve users and the research done in this project can inform the work path for many years to come.

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Relevant Council Authority/Previous Decisions

[December 19, 2023, Administrative Report No. 23-127: Budget Guidelines Report](#) – a review of proposed 2024 projects including the [proposed project budgets](#).

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.

8.3. Goal: Strengthen opportunities for social cohesion and connectedness for residents and visitors.

8.5.1. Objective: Encourage community engagement at all levels, from volunteerism to participation in municipal initiatives.

8.5.1.1. Policy: Provide appropriate and meaningful opportunities for community and partner engagement in policy-making and other decisions where relevant and appropriate.

8.6.1.1. Policy. Implement strategies to be an open and transparent government.

8.8. Goal: Ensure Whistler is an inclusive and accessible resort community.

BUDGET CONSIDERATIONS

The website Redesign Project was approved as part of the 2024 municipal projects budget for \$100,000. The project will be completed within budget but is being delivered three to four months behind schedule to accommodate additional user engagement and feedback.

LÍLWAT 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 planning on unceded territories, as currently

managed by the provincial government; achieve mutual objectives; and enable participation in Whistler's resort economy.

The territorial acknowledgement is displayed more prominently in the new website design as part of the RMOW's work to listen, learn and actively commit to reconciliation with the Lilwat Nation and the Squamish Nation on whose territory Whistler sits.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Level of community engagement commitment for this project:

Inform Consult Involve Collaborate Empower

The engagement plan for the website redesign was guided by the IAP2 Spectrum of Participation and the [RMOW's Engagement Principles](#).

Whistler.ca is the RMOW's virtual Municipal Hall, serving the community 24/7, 365 days a year and is the only channel for delivering services online. As such, learning about and applying user needs and preferences was a critical component for shaping the website's content and navigation.

By involving and consulting the community and using Whistler's collective knowledge to shape the redesigned website, efforts are best positioned to deliver a website reflective of community needs.

Continuing to seek opportunities for input on projects which directly affect the community helps the RMOW to build trust and improve the way we work for, and with, the community.

SUMMARY

This report is a progress update on the whistler.ca Redesign Project and summary of how research and five rounds of engagement informed the user-centric, simple, and accessible site in development to serve the public.

SIGN-OFFS

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