



Opportunities to Contribute to Public Engagement in Strathcona County Report

Report Prepared by Communications – Public Engagement Branch
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Introduction and Methodology

In September 2021, we asked SCOOP members their thoughts about public engagement in Strathcona County. Members gave us some great feedback, but there were some areas where we wanted to dig a little deeper.

One question specifically asked whether respondents agreed with the following statement:

Residents are provided with a reasonable opportunity to contribute to Public Engagement in Strathcona County.

Of the 391 members that responded, just over 21% disagreed or strongly disagreed with that statement. We believe that good public engagement must be constantly adapting to changing trends and expectations. We also believe that effective public engagement is only possible when residents feel encouraged and confident that their feedback will be considered thoughtfully by County administration. To this end, we reached out to SCOOP respondents who were not satisfied with public engagement in the County and invited them to share their perspectives. Via a SCOOP survey – we asked three open-ended questions:

1. What has led you to feel that residents are not provided with a reasonable opportunity to contribute to public engagement?
2. How can we provide better opportunities for engagement?
3. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us related to public engagement in Strathcona County?

This report will briefly summarize what we heard from respondents. A total of 45 respondents provided feedback. These findings will be used to improve future public engagement processes, communications, and opportunities. An appendix of all verbatim comments is provided at the end of the report.

Survey Results

Question 1: What has led you to feel that residents are not provided with a reasonable opportunity to contribute to public engagement?

Base of 45 comments.

One key theme we heard in response to this question was a feeling that decisions were often already made by the time the County opened public engagement processes. These respondents believed that public engagement is not pursued in good faith, but rather as a check box or a rubber stamp for a decision that is already made. We also heard that some respondents felt information was either presented towards a preferred decision and that insufficient information was provided to citizens. Some respondents also felt that their feedback was not listened to or considered by decision-makers at the County. Generally, respondents felt like their feedback was not considered or they did not understand how their feedback would be used in the final decision.

Some concerns about public engagement can be better described as frustrations with the functioning and decision-making of County Council. While not specifically feedback to public engagement, many of the themes were similar and warrant a summary. Respondents were similarly frustrated with existing opportunities and limited notice to speak to issues at Council meetings. Some respondents also felt Council did not listen to voices within the community and that Councilors had not sufficiently engaged residents in the community before making decisions.

Communication of public opportunities and accessibility were also raised as issues. Some respondents noted that public engagement opportunities were often poorly communicated and sent out into the community without enough notice. Some believed that a lack of notice and communication meant only small, vocal groups were heard. We also heard that some respondents, particularly in rural areas of the County, do not have strong enough internet to participate in online public engagement sessions, making them inaccessible. Some rural respondents were also concerned that in-person public engagement is largely in Sherwood Park, which is less accessible for rural residents.

In summary we heard:

- Respondents feel decisions are already made by the time public engagement occurs
- Respondents didn't feel listened to
- Opportunities to participate in public engagement are limited and poorly communicated

- Respondent felt they were not given sufficient information and understanding of the issues
- Current public engagement opportunities are not as accessible for rural residents

Question 2: How can we provide better opportunities for engagement?

Base of 43 comments.

This question challenged our respondents to think up solutions to the problems they identified.

On the topic of being heard, we received a number of ideas and suggestions. Some were specific to public engagement – while others were more focused on how political decisions get made in the county via our elected officials. These ideas – such as plebiscites, citizen panels or other opportunities for direct democracy – are beyond the scope of County public engagement but express an overall preference for more resident feedback in decision-making and more accountability for decision-makers.

Specific to public engagement we heard from some respondents a desire to have more information provided during public engagement, and for the pros and cons of decisions to be communicated to the public. We also heard a preference for more opportunities to engage with County decision-makers and ask decision-makers questions. There was also a suggestion to have decision-makers better explain how public feedback would be integrated into the final decision.

We also heard some concerns about the representativeness of SCOOP and other public engagement methods, with some respondents noting that more comprehensive methods were needed to fully engage the public on some decisions. Ideas included more town halls, public meetings, household surveys, online forums and door-to-door engagement.

On the topics of accessibility, communication and notice we heard ideas about making public engagement opportunities in high-traffic places around the community – such as Wal-Mart. We also heard a preference for more opportunities for public engagement outside of Sherwood Park, as this would be easier for rural residents to attend. Some respondents also expressed an interest in additional opportunities for online engagement, while others expressed their preference for in-person engagement. One respondent noted that different approaches would be needed to reach different members of Strathcona's diverse community – as rural residents don't necessarily have the same access to certain forms of communication and younger residents don't read the newspaper.

In summary we heard:

- Give residents more opportunities to engage and provide more information for residents to engage more meaningfully
- Make public engagement more accessible and reach residents more innovatively or comprehensively
- Explain how feedback will be used to inform decision making.

Question 3: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us related to public engagement in Strathcona County?

Base of 26 comments.

This question gave respondents an opportunity to add any additional thoughts or ideas not covered by the previous two questions.

Some respondents used this question to reiterate their main concern – that public feedback is not truly considered in public engagement and that they felt ignored by County decision-makers. We also heard concerns that information about options is poorly communicated and that the public is not given sufficient information to participate. There was also confusion about public engagement processes, with one respondent noting that it felt like there was no standard process for which issues needed public engagement.

We also heard more calls for more notice of public engagement opportunities and better communication with the community. Respondents were also concerned that small vocal groups have more influence on public engagement processes.

What's Next?

Strathcona County is committed to hearing the voices of residents and constantly improving our public engagement processes. Feedback from this survey will be used in the development of new public engagement opportunities and processes.



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Appendix A: Verbatim Comments

Question: What has led you to feel that residents are not provided with a reasonable opportunity to contribute to public engagement?

1. Our neighborhood was getting a new playground, and was required to form a society. The County gave us plenty of busy work, under the guise of engagement (form a society, fund raise, apply for grants, etc) but when it came to the real area where we wanted input - design and content of the playground, not so much. It wasn't until one member resigned from the committee that any substantive feedback was accepted. 2) Concerns on County spending (Bremner, Ag Centre) are simply ignored and the projects push ahead. 3) Disregard for County's own policy on preserving prime agricultural land. 4) Speed bumps on many streets where residents do not want them.

Although I prefer to go to open houses for information, it can be time consuming. I think if you could access the information on line in a very easy to find and mobile friendly.

awareness lacking about opportunities other than surveys

Because like all Gov't or controlling entity for a town, or hamlet, we may voice our options and concerns and it's ignored. It's like that with everything political. I don't feel we are listened to or heard.

Community not being listen to when there is MAJOR opposition to development or a change in zoning.

Could be a result of resident apathy, but SCOOP is a good example, 391 people out of 100,000 responded to this survey on public engagement. I wonder how valid the results of this engagement is, I would guess that SCOOP is likely the highest responses out of all County public engagement. I think for most things this is reasonable, but I think on large scale projects there needs to be a better mechanism to find out community support.

Did I say that?

Engagement is one thing but does anything change? It feels like any engagement is only requested so that a project can be rubber stamped. The opportunity may actually be there and reasonable but it doesn't feel like the input matters.

Expecting people to go online and join themselves is usually the only way Strathcona has been gaining info from residents since covid hit.

I think door to door gives a better perspective. Use your councillors to get into their districts and ask hard questions.

Don't just rely on residents engaging. Reach out other than letters and electronically.

From what I know, there are only 2 ways to contribute to PE. In person or on-line. We are seniors and live 30 minutes from Sh Pk and driving in and back at night is just safe for us. More importantly, our internet is not reliable or strong enough for us to participate in any kind of streaming.

Half Moon Lake Resort Expansion is one example

have attended a few open house events and found the politicians were not really interested in my point of view..

I believe SC has its mind made up and is just "paying lipservice" in the form of "surveys".

I contacted the county hotline 3 weeks ago regarding the lack of snow removal and sanding of the streets in our subdivision in the Ridge as I had slid off the road due to excessive ice conditions and have yet to see a sanding or snow removal truck . No response from anyone at the county!

I do not feel that this county cares what the residents want. I feel that Administration tells Council what they want them to know and the councillors do not question anything but take the information from Administration as the fact. Many times it is not!

I don't feel enough is being done to inform rural residence of opportunities

I feel that there are limited opportunities or considerations given for public engagement. That could be b/c COVID has reduced the opportunity and options

I feel there are opportunities.

I feel we have reasonable opportunity, through on line and emails

I think that people have a reasonable opportunity to provide input, but that input is in many cases ignored or discounted by Council. We need more alignment between popular opinion/thought and Council debates.

I think the quick surveys are great but for me engagement means providing information on an issue - the pros and cons - like a briefing note that might be provided to an elected decision maker. Perhaps I am not looking in the right places. For example, what public engagement occurred before cameras were installed at intersections and subsequently outlandish tickets (a friend received \$405. ticket at Granada and Sherwood Dr.)? I did not notice any real public engagement on that decision. It would have been good to provide the evidence base for the decision and placement of cameras.

I was never informed of traffic calming on Meadowview Drive done during the road rehabilitation. Speeding through the playground zone is a concern and was not addressed.

If it wasn't for SCOOP I would not hear about anything

Insufficient notice of Council meetings, lack of agenda information.

It does not appear that there are public notices about meeting re: public engagement. Not sure where to go to contribute.

it is almost impossible to get information, other than general info, on county operations. everything the county does should be public knowledge to the taxpayer

It just seems that the decisions are already made before any PE, and the responses from us are often not taken into account.

Listen to ALL opinions, not just certain groups

Lot of issues I only find out in the local paper after council has voted. So to late.

Most of the meetings I have attended, the Public are shown information which is presented in a way that allows the Administration to go back to Council with a story which allows a project to move forward with real debate..

Often the times and dates for engagement opportunities fall on days or times that I can not change my schedule. Knowing that COVID has interfered with planning face to face opportunities, I am well aware that many people have difficulty with technology and zoom in particular.

ON THE BIG TICKET ITEMS THAT COST TENS OF MILLIONS OF TAX PAYER DOLLARS, LIKE THE POINT, BREMNER, THE JOGGING TRACK ETC, COUNCIL ARROGANTLY PROCEEDS WITHOUT A VOTE FROM THE TAX PAYERS. A PLEBISCITE SHOULD BE DONE. THESE THINGS ARE GOING

TO LEAD TO HIGHER TAXES, AND THE BURDEN WILL BE PLACED UPON THE TAX PAYER.
TOTALLY DISGRACEFUL.

Opportunities to contribute are not well advertised. When we have participated in these opportunities the narrative has been slanted towards what the County has already decided. After attending 3 or 4 of these sessions we deemed them a waste of our time as it was obvious what had been already decided. It became obvious that the County was just going through the motions. It is really too bad that this is the way it is because I would really like to serve my County in some way now I am retired.

Outside of these surveys, there is little opportunity to provide feedback as safety protocols have limited opportunities to engage with meaningful decision makers.

Over the years of my involvement with the County I have the strong opinion that decisions are made prior to PE and PE is done only so you can check off that task.

Personally, I have not been aware of these opportunities. In my mind that means that either I did not see the advertising for the opportunity or there was no advertising of the opportunity. I think the same method should be used consistently so people that want to participate in the PE know where to look.

Public engagement is poorly advertised and only minimal residents respond leading to small vocal groups getting what they want.

Residents are provided with a reasonable opportunity to contribute to public engagement, however I sometimes feel that it is only an exercise to see if the comments made are only to see if it fits into the plans already made and looking for a rubber stamp to go ahead with a predetermined action.

sometimes community development staff go into focus groups, community meetings with a hidden agenda. it has already been decided now we have to get the residents to think they made the decision.,

Sometimes there isn't enough lead time to plan to attend opportunities for the public to engage.

The time allotted for speaking is almost nil - there is only time for a few select to voice their opinion - increase your time for others to speak out

There is currently no in person public engagement. As well, even with surveys and such, council does what they want regardless of public input.

There is little or no information available at a deeper level. During the campaigning before the election we were hearing about things from candidates that we had no idea about. We haven't had a printed newspaper available (or at least delivered out here) in years, and we don't feel we should have to check the website all the time for 'what's new', nor was some of the info we were told about on the website.

Timing if meetings does not always allow attendance, time constraints do not allow full engagement.

Voices not heard and no actions taken on the subjects under question. No response from Mayor or other counsellors when questions asked.

Question: How can we provide better opportunities for engagement?

A newsletter that was printed/mailed out with highlights would be helpful.

Actually listen! Seems some decisions are made strictly on the basis of tax revenue generation. Actually listen to the community!!!

Allow residents who are interested to register for council meetings notice similar to the emergency alert system.

answer questions truthfully when asked.

Appoint citizens to approve any final decisions

As above, allow more time for residents to really speak out - allow a certain amount of time for each person

Ask for our input before the decision makers get involved.

Better notice, and maybe using routes the general public is more likely to access (i.e. few people in younger populations read newspapers).

Communicate with residents about changes in their community

County staff project that they know best, and really citizen feedback is just a part of a process (but will proceed as planned regardless).

Doing open houses at the mall or in Walmart or similar areas.

Face to face opportunities are really the best for engaging people, and generating ideas and I truly hope our future will allow to just that

find other means of communicating due to rural not getting the sherwood park newspaper

Have the councillors get more involved with the residents. I have yet to see any comments in the local newspaper since the election and before that!

Have town halls, public meetings, etc. along with more accountability for public officials.

House to house surveys on key matters

I don't know but if the politicians are not interested then nothing will work. They have their own agendas eg. the hugely overpriced palace}

I don't know.

I have no other ideas for the county to provide better opportunities for engagement..

If results of vote can be published after the fact in SP News, why can't an upcoming agenda be published say 2 weeks ahead to give citizens time to react.

Individual Council members must be more in tune with the the Public in a way that they know who they can get information from other than the story coming from Admin.

Knock on doors, ask hard questions.

Pose specific area questions. Not just generic to the county.

Large scale projects (horse facility, fieldhouse, etc) should go to plebiscite after they are fully costed. Spend the money to get to the point where you can the project will cost 'x' amount of dollars and then let the residents vote.

More notice of opportunities and decision makers being available to provide information and listen to feedback.

Most public engagement seems to be limited to road and subdivision development. It would be nice to see this expanded into other areas with community impact.

N/a

Need to know sooner with various options to participate

Need to provide more information to help public truly engage. Non-partisan information - the facts of why the decision is being considered and the evidence favouring the variety of

"sides" to an issue. The scoop surveys get at opinions but largely uninformed opinions, in my opinion!

Perhaps really listen to what your constituents are saying, their are diverse opinions on projects with great facts to back concerns that are not being addressed, especially with regards to the Pointe and upcoming developments to certain areas

Provide nit only the opportunity to speak up but publicly post what changes were made due to that feedback. I think this would provide more community engagement knowing a resident has an actual opportunity to be heard.

Providing timely feedback and responses

Quit be discriminate to the people

Seems better now that I am involved with scoop. Important issues should have letter mailed to the affected residents.

Send information with our taxes. If something is going to effect my world, I think that the councillor that we vote in, should be telling us to take notice. Not everthing I care about.

SET UP AN ONLINE SYSTEM TO HAVE TAX PAYERS PROVIDE INPUT. SURE, THE PUBLIC CAN ATTEND A COUNCIL MEETING, BUT THAT IS CUMBERSOME FOR MANY, AND THE RESPONSE WOULD BE FAR HIGHER ON LINE.

Show that you care and that you want outside opinions. Administration has shown that they are not interested in hearing opinions that are counter to theirs.

Start your opportunities for engagement with a blank slate not just sticking post it notes on who likes what or at least in some way consider that your citizens (at least some of them) can have an original and more practice (and less expensive) idea than you.

Strong, reliable internet would be the best but also PE in all the centers around the county that we can drive to safely. Josephburg, South Cooking Lake, Strathcona Olympiette Center etc.

tell the truth, always

That ever question is answered and taken seriously. Many decisions are not for the PEOPLE but for the benefit of the politicians.

The results of the surveys used to gather the feelings and tone of residents should an integral part of any debate. For example, Bremner or the horse facility, where was there a presentation during the debates of these expenditures/decisions on what County residents thought?

Use the same method to notify people of when and where the public engagement sessions are being held. You could have a website or an email list of people who are interested in participating in these types of sessions so they can be notified.

Yes - more avenues like Scoop and better advertisement. Perhaps in utility bills - an info sheet

Question: Is there anything else you'd like to share with us related to public engagement in Strathcona County?

After surveys are completed, I think more study should be done to see if the majority of the county agrees or is it only the majority of the responders to the survey are considered to be enough input to make decisions. Do we have a good enough cross section of the county to say on average the survey is representative of the entire county.

Council would never have eliminated the Gopher Population if they had been better informed. They would have used traffick Circles instead of lights if they were properly informed in many places.. They would have measurement system that record how efficient each department is and how comparisons year over year of productivity measurments,

Do things in the interest of the community and NOT just to generate tax revenues.

Give more dates and times so that it can accommodate people with different schedules

How about publishing in the Sherwood Park paper the results of the surveys and other community feedback compared to the decisions made by Council. There needs to be some objective reporting on those who support an idea or project and those who are against it.

I just feel that they are not taken seriously

Case in point the "speed bumps" on Glenbrook Blvd

I wonder what models for public engagement are working around the world. Creative models.

I would like to see more community responses to your surveys

Just look at all the decisions regarding traffic safety and land development. The County either does a terrible job of explaining options if any, and and even poorer job of explaining how they arrived at decisions. Council is in lockstep with admin. This is a County that is lead by sheep who listen to the loudest few people and not the majority.

make expenditures and revenue public knowledge

no

No

No

No.

No.

Open up public engagement in person again. Enough with this COVID restriction bullshit which has no medical basis.

Organized groups should not be allowed to participate. Groups that lobby seem to get their way to the detriment of ordinary citizens.

PE is prettymuch a pointless exercise.

Quit being discriminatory to ALL residents whether they are jabbed or not! We're all Gods children!!!

Scoop should include some financial impact statements. For example you could phrase a question "would you support a property tax increase of 'x' to pay for increased snow clearing (or whatever service)" And more use of ranked preferences, something like "for a 0.5% tax increase please rank the following: Horse facility, Field house, Increased Garbage collection, Increased snow removal, no changes needed don't increase taxes" Something like this would be more meaningful in my opinion.

Sometimes it seems quite useless for any public person to voice an opinion - county officials may have their minds made up - and are doing this only to appease the public

Sometimes things take much too long to get done - ie. a Senior Hub is needed now.

There should be a standard of when issues have go for public engagement. If there already is a process then it should be made available to residents. I am never sure which issues will go for pe and which will move forward without it. Some times issues have moved forward when

I thought there should have been some engagement. Also there should be an easily stated opportunity for residents to send their thoughts that don't involve attending either an in person or virtual meeting as some people can't make them or don't feel comfortable speaking in front of people. The process should be standardized and made public.

To angry to respond any further!

We have a high concern over money that is being spent for new building - especially commercial - when so much of what we already have is EMPTY!

When public engagement is undertaken the staff do a great job.