

PUBLIC ADVISORY COMMITTEES AS A PUBLIC PARTICIPATION TOOL

Issue

The alignment of the Public Advisory Committees with the Public Participation Strategy & Toolkit as recommended at the January 15, 2018 Governance and Priorities Committee Meeting is provided for Council's consideration.

Motion Proposed by Administration

That the following recommendations based on the Public Participation Strategy & Toolkit be adopted as recommended by the Governance and Priorities Committee:

1. Public Advisory Committees are an important form of public participation and will continue to form a key role in the future;
2. Public Advisory Committees will only be utilized when it has been determined that the issue lands within the engagement zone of the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum;
3. The additional criteria of Council perspective, complexity, conflict and impact to determine if a Public Advisory Committee is the appropriate tool for participation;
4. Council determines the mandate and term for Public Advisory Committees;
5. Council does not sit on Public Advisory Committees;
6. Administration explore and present options for processes for developing recommendations by the Public Advisory Committees that upholds the principles of consultation in the engagement zone of the public participation toolkit; and
7. That a second phase Public Advisory Committees report regarding the review and alignment of existing Public Advisory Committees be brought back to Council by May 28, 2018.

Report, Analysis and Financial Implications

At the January 8, 2018 Council meeting, the Public Participation Strategy & Toolkit was accepted as a "resource" for Administration who are responsible for designing and implementing processes for public participation. With consistent use, this Toolkit will contribute to increase capacity by the Town in designing, resourcing, executing, reporting from, and using the results of public participation activities in effective decision-making and service delivery.

At that meeting, Council adopted the principles for public engagement, the IAP2 spectrum and its core values, the roles and responsibilities in developing a public participation strategy, and the input and engagement zones.

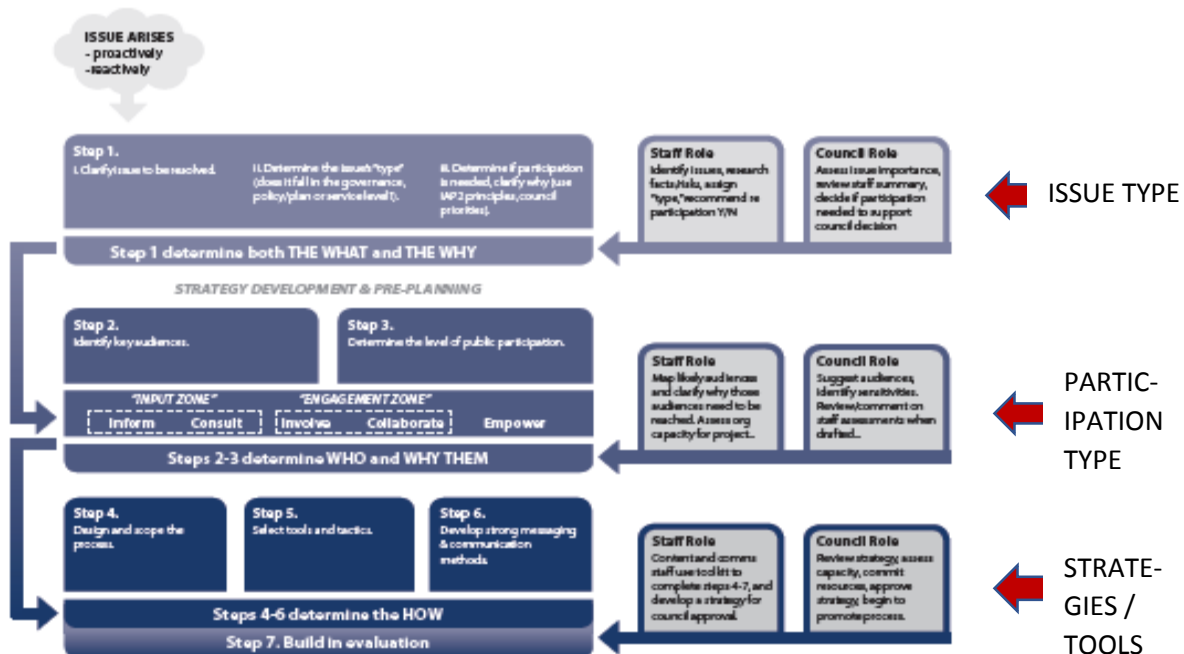
The Toolkit reproduces and references the 5-column "public participation continuum" developed by the IAP2. This continuum displays the different levels of possible participation to encourage the reader to consider what level of participation best suits a given issue.

	INPUT ZONE		ENGAGEMENT ZONE		
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
GOAL	To provide balanced and objective information in a timely manner.	To obtain feedback on analysis, issues, alternatives, and decisions.	To work with public to make sure that concerns and aspirations are considered and understood.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision-making.	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE	"We will keep you informed."	"We will listen to and acknowledge your concerns."	"We will work with you to ensure your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the decisions made."	"We will look to you for advice and innovation and incorporate this in decisions as much as possible."	"We will implement what you decide."

The Toolkit describes the Input Zone as “appropriate for many topics and issues, as it seeks to ensure that accurate and timely information on an initiative is provided to appropriate audiences”. It will be used typically with the Town when we have clarity on what it is trying to achieve and how it will get there.

The Toolkit describes the Engagement Zone as being used “for more controversial, complex, and potentially more impactful issues or decisions. In these cases, the municipality does not yet have a draft policy or proposal and needs more substantive input to get there.” It is to be used when the Town seeks to “figure things out together” with citizens and stakeholders.

The Toolkit then sets out a 7-step design process for Administration and Council to follow when an issue that may benefit from public participation activities arises. Critically, the design process has a major focus on assessing whether an issue falls in the Input Zone (covering the “inform” and “consult” columns) or the Engagement Zone (covering the “involve” and “collaborate” column) of the continuum.



Inviting the public to participate in decision-making should lead to the increased credibility of local government. This is achieved through ongoing communications, process consistency, role clarity, and assessing organizational capacity.

These elements of the public participation toolkit were approved by Council at the January 8th Council meeting.

Discussion:

The Public Participation Strategy & Toolkit recognizes Public Advisory Committees as one of the tools in the Engagement Zone, under Collaboration. Administration has worked with Council and MODUS Planning, Design and Engagement to determine what the proper role and function of a Public Advisory Committee can be.

Several activities were included in the process:

Background review – current Terms of Reference, literature on best practices, etc.; Council and Committee Chair and Administration interviews – with summary results provided to Council (attached);

Council workshops about governance and public participation and Public Advisory Committees in general.

It is important to note that the interview process included a sampling of Public Advisory Committees (Culture, Parks and Recreation Committee, Economic Development Committee, Family and Community Support Services Advisory Committee, Finance and Budget Committee, Okotoks Public Library Board, and the Public Safety and Security Committee). Council's governance committees that are quasi-judicial (MPC, SDAB, ARB) are not part of this review as they have legislative requirements for specific areas of decision making that are delegated to them by Council.

The main findings of the activities to date can be categorized under the following four themes:

Understanding Public Advisory Committees: Definitions and Benefits;

Rationale for Public Advisory Committees: Context and the Need;

Form of Public Advisory Committees: How to Build Them; and

Function of Citizen Advisory Committees: How to Run Them.

Understanding Public Advisory Committees/Committees: Definitions and Benefits

Many local governments use "Public Advisory Committees" to provide thoughtful advice from the public on an issue that reflects Council priorities.

Public Advisory Committees are volunteer bodies of residents who typically represent a range of perspectives and experiences. The comments and analysis these residents provide through the activities and recommendations of a Public Advisory Committee complements staff and Council consideration of that same topic.

The main purpose of this type of Committee is to analyze a complex issue, (where staff and Council cannot easily resolve it) in support of Administration who are to bring advice and/or recommendations to Council for further discussion and decisions. Topics fall into three categories: broad governance discussions, new or revised policies/plans, or service reviews.

Public Advisory Committees are formed around a clearly defined issue or opportunity that is of substantial importance to the municipality, and which Council requires public advice. This ensures that the deliberations and recommendations of the Public Advisory Committee are relevant to the municipality and to the community.

Public Advisory Committees do not just review and comment on reports and draft recommendations prepared by staff. Instead, with staff, they delve into both the substance of the issues and options to address identified issues, then work together with staff to provide advice and/or recommendations for Council consideration. A commitment is made that the advice of the Committee will be carefully considered when decisions are being made by Council. If staff and Council can easily resolve a topic without the use of such a Committee, or by using a different engagement zone tool, then a Public Advisory Committee would not be recommended.

Recommendation #1: Citizen Advisory Committees are an important form of public participation and will continue to form a key role in the future.

Rationale for Citizen Advisory Committees: Context and the Need

The Engagement Zone is used for more contentious, complex, and impactful topics. Additionally, in this Zone the local government usually does not have a draft policy or proposal and needs more substantive input to get there. This is clearly the Zone Public Advisory Committees are suited to, especially given that there are many other types of participation activities better suited to input zone initiatives.

Given their purpose and function, Public Advisory Committees are identified by IAP2 as being best suited to the collaboration column of the continuum. Similarly, the Okotoks Toolkit identifies them as falling in the Engagement Zone, stressing that this is where residents, staff and Council are trying to “figure things out together”.

Engagement Zone activities can be richly rewarding, but they carry more risks and typically require more resources, more effort, and more time from both the local government and the community. Initiatives falling in this Zone demand careful planning and the choice of the right tool or combination thereof.

Recommendation #2: Public Advisory Committees only be utilized when it has been determined that the issue lands within the Engagement Zone.

The Okotoks Public Participation Strategy & Toolkit offers numerous formats and/or tools to support Engagement Zone initiatives, with Public Advisory Committees being one featured item. Step 5 of the design process asks staff and Council to carefully consider and choose from the available tools for the appropriate Zone.

Staff should evaluate the topic, relevant community context, and history carefully before suggesting a Public Advisory Committee. There are four criteria that should be given particular credence during this evaluation:

Council perspective: is Council in agreement or not in terms of the possible outcome?

Complexity: is the issue a complex one, not easily resolved? Are there multiple ways to proceed?

Potential for conflict: might the issue divide the community and create conflict among different perspectives? Will cultural, economic, and/or demographic differences be inflamed?

Impact: will the decision to be made be of significant impact to the community and/or the organization? Will it affect many or few citizens and stakeholders?

The more of these questions that are answered in the affirmative, the more confident staff can be in recommending a Public Advisory Committee. Doing this evaluation can assist both Council and staff to develop a clear statement of the issue that the new and “custom-built” Public Advisory Committee will focus on.

Recommendation #3: The additional criteria of Council perspective, complexity, conflict and impact to determine if a Public Advisory Committee is the appropriate tool for participation.

Form of Public Advisory Committees: How to Build Them

A core requirement for a successful Public Advisory Committee is having an agreed upon timeline for the Committee to be formed, to do its work, provide its analysis and recommendations. This point reflects the findings that all Public Advisory Committees should be term-specific or “ad hoc” in nature (no permanent/standing advisory committees).

Recommendation #4: Public Advisory Committees have an agreed to mandate and term by Council.

A further piece of work that staff and Council must do before forming a new Public Advisory Committee is to ensure that the Committee will add diverse perspective to the discussion (the “community representativeness” principles), along with additional knowledge/ideas (the “community expertise” principle). This point reflects the findings that recruiting residents to ensure representativeness and to access local expertise on the topic was effective and desired.

It will be important to clarify: is this Committee the only engagement mechanism or one of several being used to come to a decision; and to clarify if links between this

Public Advisory Committee and Town Business Centres are required. This should be articulated in the Terms of Reference with dates, a clear statement of purpose and need, as well as accountability aspects.

Role of Staff Liaison – support orientation; establish timelines and work plan in coordination with the chair; ensure consistent process and practices across Public Advisory Committees; coordinate Public Advisory Committee activities and workflow; provide research and analysis as needed/reasonable; communicate and manage expectations and deliverables; clearly communicate discussions, findings, and recommendations to decision makers.

Role of Chair – coordinate the work of the Public Advisory Committee and encourage participation, while limiting demands placed on staff; respect reporting to staff; facilitate consensus decision-making for the Committee.

Role of Council – Council assesses the importance of the key issue(s) to be resolved by the Public Advisory Committee, suggests possible stakeholders, and assesses the organizational capacity required to resolve the issue, and commits the resources required. Council will not be on the Public Advisory Committee because, as identified earlier, Council will not have a unified position on the issue, and a Councillor cannot be there to represent the whole of Council.

Recommendation #5: Council does not sit on Public Advisory Committees.

Function of Citizen Advisory Committees: How to Run Them

Given the effort level involved in Public Advisory Committees, consideration of both organizational and community capacity to support them must be made. Capacity involves both financial, staff (both in time and skill), and space.

After a review of past practices in creating and supporting Public Advisory Committees at the Town, many points raised by MODUS highlight improvements required in administrative processes, including recruitment, orientation, and roles.

Public Advisory Committees are found in collaboration and it is important to note that the way the Committee functions requires more than a majority vote when landing at a recommendation. An approach that articulates the common will of the Committee when it emerges is necessary to ensure the collaboration is safeguarded. An example of this is the consensus process. Consensus is reached when all participants are willing to move forward together, even if not everyone agrees on all of the details.

Consensus is only one approach that could be explored as a way of functioning for Public Advisory Committees. There are other alternatives that Administration can explore to ensure that the integrity of collaboration is maintained.

Recommendation #6: Administration explore and present options for processes for developing recommendations by the Public Advisory Committees that upholds the principles of consultation in the Engagement Zone of the Public Participation Toolkit.

As indicated earlier, this report represents the alignment of future Public Advisory Committees with the Public Participation Strategy & Toolkit. Phase two of the process, which is expected in the first quarter of 2018, is to align the current Public Advisory Committees with the proposed future state for Committees within the Okotoks Public Participation Strategy & Toolkit.

Recommendation #7: The phase 2 implementation report be brought back to Council by May 28, 2018.

Strategic Plan Goals

<input type="checkbox"/>	Manage Community Growth	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Provide Strong Governance
<input type="checkbox"/>	Provide Quality Community Infrastructure	<input type="checkbox"/>	Healthy and Safe Community
<input type="checkbox"/>	Maintain Organizational Excellence	<input type="checkbox"/>	Foster Economic Vitality
		<input type="checkbox"/>	Promote Environmental Stewardship

Governing Policies/Bylaws/Legislation or Agreements

n/a

Public Engagement/Communication Strategy

n/a

Alternatives for Consideration

n/a

CAO Comments

Further review of Public Advisory Committees to align with the Public Participation Policy, Strategy & Toolkit is an important alignment that will be beneficial for both citizen members, staff, and Council

It is considered best practice to review Council Committees on a regular basis as suggested in the 2012 Governance Review by MNP, and as municipal governance experts, such as George Cuff, have written about.

Attachment(s)

1. Summary of Council and Committee Chair Interviews – October 2017

Prepared by:
Nancy Weigel
Corporate & Strategic Services Director
January 16, 2018