



Report

Engagement research findings and recommendations

Regional District of Central Okanagan

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Date: May 2021

Engagement research findings and recommendations report for the Regional District of Central Okanagan

1. Summary

This engagement research findings report summarizes the process and what was heard during interviews and surveys as part of the research phase.

Research took place during May 2021 and included interviews and surveys with the Board, senior leadership team and staff, interviews with communications and/or engagement leads with other regional districts, a review of International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) methodology and best practices, and research into approaches by other local governments in B.C. and elsewhere in Canada.

Four key themes emerged from the research:

1. Regional districts have unique engagement and communication challenges
2. Engagement approach should be consistent
3. Develop an online engagement tool
4. Knowing your audience is key

The following recommendations are the result of the research findings, and with discussions with the RDCO. Implementation of these recommendations will take the RDCO to a more formalized public engagement presence, using best practices, consistent approaches, and will provide the Board and staff with feedback necessary for improved decision-making.

Recommendations:

1. Role and process clarity
2. Coordination and consistency
3. Improve communications
4. Increase diversity and inclusivity

2. Introduction

The Regional District of Central Okanagan (RDCO) is embarking on significant changes and improvements to its digital communication and engagement channels. In 2021, RDCO will be launching a new website, and will be integrating an engagement platform in order to deliver a fulsome public engagement experience for the district's residents and stakeholders.

The RDCO will be developing a public engagement policy, public engagement framework, and a toolkit with templates for staff. These documents and materials will be drafted using current best practices, as well as insight uncovered during this engagement research findings exercise.

3. Methodology

Research included review of IAP2 methodology and best practices, general research into engagement best practices in other local governments, and interviews and surveys of key people:

- Interviews: one-on-one over telephone
 - 3 Board members
 - 6 senior staff members
 - 5 regional districts (communications or engagement lead)
- Surveys (via SurveyMonkey)
 - One questionnaire for the Board (3 completed)
 - One questionnaire for staff (10 completed)

Interviews and surveys followed the same general themes, with questions tailored to each audience:

- Credibility/reputation of RDCO
- Timeliness/effectiveness of current engagement activities
- Identifying any gaps or opportunities

Interviews with regional districts focussed on how they approached engagement, what solutions or tools they used, and how their role functions within their organization.

4. What was heard

Overall, four key themes were identified from the interviews and surveys:

1. **Regional districts have unique engagement and communication challenges:** All interviewees noted that many people don't understand the role and function of regional districts, which makes engagement a challenge. There is further divide depending on whether someone lives in an electoral area with an elected director, or in an urban area with a mayor and council.
2. **Engagement approach should be consistent:** Some projects or departments seem to do more engagement than others. This can be as a result of the type of project, scale of project, or involvement by consultants who may bring engagement activities to the table. Smaller projects can sometimes be overlooked for engagement support until the project is well underway and community involvement has developed independent of RDCO channels and messaging.
3. **Develop an online engagement tool:** In support of a consistent engagement approach, the RDCO should provide a single digital source of truth for engagement activities. In addition to the new website (late 2021), a platform such as Bang the Table would provide a consistent location for the necessary tools and structure to deliver quality public engagement. In addition, learnings during COVID-19 on the positive delivery of online engagement should continue to be explored and utilized, even as in-person engagement returns.
4. **Knowing your audience is key:** Reaching and engaging with residents and key stakeholders is vital for a successful engagement plan. Understanding who, exactly, needs to be at the engagement table is crucial: communities may have unique communication channels, local champions, or a perspective on the issue that differs from someone who lives elsewhere.

Staff and Board interview and survey findings:

The first question asked how well they felt RDCO (or in the case of other regional districts, how they felt their organization) engagement its residents and stakeholders.

- The Board and staff scored RDCO an average of 5.2/10 for their engagement effort.

"It varies from department to department"

"We do legislative requirements very well"

"We do an excellent job, but residents don't get it"

The follow up asked how well residents and stakeholders understand the engagement process, their role, and how their feedback was used as part of the decision-making process.

- The Board and staff scored 3.3/10 for resident's understanding of the district's engagement processes.

"Most people don't know what a regional district is"

"In the past, we didn't do a good job of describing how feedback will be used"

The next questions asked about the process to initiate public engagement as part of a project, and staff were also asked about their role in that process.

- Both staff and the Board indicated there were no formal process to conduct engagement, beyond the Community Charter legislative requirements.
- Most staff indicated they now look to the Communication and Information Services director for guidance on whether to do engagement on a project, or to what level.
- Staff reported varied roles as part of the design and execution of an engagement plan. Staff that are involved in a lot of projects that required engagement tended to have more of a role in the planning and execution of engagement, whereas others whose areas had less engagement had less of a role, and instead looked to the Communications Director and CAO for support.
- Both staff and Board reported some engagement, especially in the past, happened late in the process and was rushed. This has improved in the last year as processes to identify engagement opportunities have been implemented.

The next question asked about pandemic-era engagement, and if there had been any positive or negative outcomes from moving engagement to a mostly online environment.

- Both staff and the Board indicated a generally neutral outcome, with some meetings moving to Zoom and other engagement activities paused.
- Most noted that many residents had little trouble using online apps such as Zoom.
- The pandemic has fast-tracked some District processes such as setting up Zoom Board meetings.

The next question asked about a specific engagement project that went really well. Projects could be from anywhere – a project they were involved in, a project from another municipality, or from elsewhere.

- Several staff and Board members said *Imagine Kelowna* was a successful engagement project:
 - Numerous ways to get involved.
 - Ample reporting-back as the process moved forward.
 - Good feedback for residents who participated in the process.
- Other projects cited were successful because they reached a broad audience, had good supporting communication, and set clear expectations for participants.

The follow up question asked about a time an engagement project went sideways or didn't meet expectations of residents.

- Examples included projects that were already a “done deal,” instances where residents were already polarized and simply wanted to vent their frustration, or when the magnitude of the proposed change on residents was underestimated by staff which led to push-back.

Both the Board and staff were asked about whether they support additional funding for public engagement.

- The Board had a mixed response, with one saying yes and three saying maybe.
- Staff supported additional funding, with 12 saying yes, two saying maybe, one saying no, and one unsure.
- All agreed good engagement was important for the RDCO and for the success of District projects.

A question for staff asked about their experience working with contracted engagement consultants. Often, larger capital projects can involve engagement that is delivered as part of the contracted service.

- Staff indicated that this can be a mixed experience: sometimes the consultant delivers a full and complete engagement component, and at other times this engagement can miss expectations.
- Additional guidance and a description of expectations in the request for proposal documents could reduce these inconsistencies.

The final question asked for their thoughts on delivering engagement and communications to such a diverse area such as the RDCO. This question was aimed at uncovering any best practices or tactics that could be incorporated into the Engagement Toolkit.

- Electoral Areas are very unique, and should be considered their own entity, much like a local government.
- Consider a regular e-newsletter to each electoral area.
- Consider factors such as what motivates people who live in different areas.
- Electoral area “road shows” can be mixed in terms of how they are received: if there is a specific issue or topic, they can be successful, however if there isn't a topic that draws people in, they are less successful.
- Leverage neighbourhood associations and other groups who can help fan information out.
- Improve the RDCO website so information about specific areas or neighbourhoods is easy for people find.

5. Regional district perspectives

A total of five regional districts were interviewed. Staff interviewed were the engagement and/or communication lead.

- Columbia-Shuswap Regional District
- Comox Valley Regional District
- Kootenay Boundary Regional District
- Regional District of Nanaimo
- Regional District of North Okanagan

The first question asked about their role, department structure, reporting structure, and how long their role has existed.

- 3.2 years was the average time their roles have been in place, indicating that engagement and/or communications is a fairly new role in their organizations.
- Three report to a corporate officer, and two report directly to the CAO. One will be changing to report directly to their CAO later this year.
- Most operated in a single or two-person department.

The next question asked about how they deliver engagement.

- All had a role in developing and/or reviewing engagement plans for projects, with staff who deliver engagement, and with consultants delivering engagement on behalf of their organization.

The next two questions asked about how well they felt their regional district engaged its residents, and how well they felt their residents understood the engagement process.

- Both questions scored well, with most providing a score between 5 to 8 for both questions.
- All concluded that improving engagement was an ongoing and continuous process.

Respondents were asked about how engagement processes were initiated:

- Three indicated they try to get to the 'engagement table' early, and have existing tools to help with that early intervention.
- Two indicated their roles were still new and their process to start conversations about the need for engagement were still being formalized.
- Staff training on engagement best practices was cited as an important step in having departments identify the need for engagement for their projects.
 - Annual budget and work planning processes were ideal times to review anticipated engagement activities for the following year.

The next two questions asked about what tools they have in place to support engagement, and what tools they are missing or wish they had.

- Three use Bang the Table, one has developed a facsimile of Bang the Table on their website, and one has no existing online platform.
- Two are using a new engagement strategy and toolkit (built collaboratively).
- Regional districts without a strategy or toolkit indicated they wished they had these tools.
- Wish list items included expanding their social media channels, and social media monitoring tools.

The next question asked about their pandemic-era engagement experience. Their responses were positive, with all indicating engagement has remained steady or even increased since meetings moved online.

- Zoom meetings are convenient, and eliminate the need to drive, especially in the winter.
- People with busy schedules and families are better able to join an online meeting, as they can participate while doing other tasks.
- People are more at ease asking questions in an online environment, instead of being at a microphone in front of a crowd.
- There is always the subjective suspicion that some older people are not able to connect online, however there is no data to support this.

The next questions asked about examples of engagement activities that went well, or went sideways.

- Engagement using a variety of tactics and aimed at a diverse range of people were markers of excellent engagement.
- Face-to-face meetings are best for highly contentious issues.
- Failure to plan engagement, rushed or poor timing, and not identifying the right stakeholders led to public engagement failure.

The final question asked for their thoughts on delivering engagement and communications to a diverse area and geographically spread-out region. This question was aimed at uncovering any best practices or tactics that could be incorporated into the Engagement Toolkit.

- Know the community you need to engage and use existing connections to fan information out. This can include local champions, neighbourhood associations, Facebook groups, business groups, and of course the Electoral Area Directors.
- Generally speaking, electoral areas tend to prefer printed materials: posters, handouts, addressed mailers.
- Solid waste coordinators know electoral areas well and can provide insight into how each community prefers to communicate. Tap into the learnings of other staff who regularly work in these communities.

6. IAP2 best practices

This review included a scan of International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) materials. IAP2 is the preeminent international organization advancing the practice of public participation. They support people who implement or participate in public decision-making processes and focus on practical tools and best practices.

The main references were the 165-page *Planning for Effective Public Participation*, and the 155-page *Techniques for Effective Public Participation*, both © 2016 IAP2 International. These are the primary reference guides used in IAP2 *Foundations in Public Participation* training.

The most critical pieces of information are the IAP2 Spectrum of Participation, Core Values for Public Participation, and the Code of Ethics. These three items are becoming commonplace reference items in public engagement plans around the world, and many local governments in B.C. are using these to some extent. The general public is, by extension, becoming exposed to these concepts and are somewhat aware of what they mean.

IAP2 Spectrum of Participation

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public Participation Goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the Public	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

IAP2 Core Values for the Practice of Public Engagement

1. Public engagement is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. Public engagement includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. Public engagement promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. Public engagement seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. Public engagement seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. Public engagement provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. Public engagement communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

IAP2 Code of Ethics

1. **Purpose.** We support public participation as a process to make better decisions that incorporate the interests and concerns of all affected stakeholders and meet the needs of the decision-making body.
2. **Role of practitioner.** We will enhance the public's participation in the decision-making process and assist decision-makers in being responsive to the public's concerns and suggestions.
3. **Trust.** We will undertake and encourage actions that build trust and credibility for the process among all the participants.

4. **Defining the public's role.** We will carefully consider and accurately portray the public's role in the decision-making process.
5. **Openness.** We will encourage the disclosure of all information relevant to the public's understanding and evaluation of a decision.
6. **Access to the process.** We will ensure that stakeholders have fair and equal access to the public participation process and the opportunity to influence decisions.
7. **Respect for communities.** We will avoid strategies that risk polarizing community interests or that appear to "divide and conquer."
8. **Advocacy.** We will advocate for the public participation process and will not advocate for interest, party, or project outcome.
9. **Commitments.** We ensure that all commitments made to the public, including those by the decision-maker, are made in good faith.
10. **Support of the practice.** We will mentor new practitioners in the field and educate decision-makers and the public about the value and use of public participation.

Additional resources outlined include tools to develop participation objectives, selecting appropriate techniques that align with participation objectives, ways to identify stakeholders and their needs and expectations, how to develop an engagement plan, and how to integrate communications strategies to reach and engage the public.

Techniques for Effective Public Participation explores the tactics used to deliver public participation, how to choose the right tools to meet objectives, and what resources are required to deliver each tactic. Tactics are arranged by level on the IAP2 spectrum.

Materials used to develop objectives, identify stakeholders, create an engagement plan, and tactics relevant for RDCO engagement will be outlined and described in the Engagement Toolkit.

7. Recommendations

The following recommendations are the result of the research findings, and with discussions with the RDCO. Implementation of these recommendations will take the RDCO to a more formalized public engagement presence, using best practices, consistent approaches, and will provide the Board and staff with feedback necessary for improved decision-making.

1. Role and process clarity:

- 1.1 Draft and approve a public engagement policy that formalizes the RDCO public engagement process.
 - The policy should identify high-level expectations and procedures for public engagement processes.
- 1.2 Draft and approve a public engagement framework that operationalizes the policy.
 - The Public Engagement Framework should answer *why* and *how* the RDCO carries out public engagement. The framework should also describe the tools and toolkit that will aid staff in the delivery of public engagement

2. Coordination and consistency:

- 2.1 Draft and approve a public engagement toolkit for use by staff, elected officials, and contractors.
 - The toolkit should clearly outline the roles and responsibilities of department leadership, staff, contractors, and elected officials; provide engagement decision rubrics; describe engagement tactics, and when to use them; include simple checklists; and, outline ways to close the loop on sharing what has been heard.
- 2.2 Train staff and elected officials on engagement principles
 - Provide training, either in-house or external IAP2 training opportunities, for staff and elected officials in order to increase their understanding of public engagement principles, roles, tactics, and how engagement feedback can be used to inform the decision-making process.

3. Improve communications

- 3.1 Ensure information on projects and engagement is easy to find on the new RDCO website
 - The RDCO has been developing a new website, with the aim of launching it by Fall 2021. The needs of residents and stakeholders, in particular those in Electoral Areas, should be considered when designing site architecture and navigation.
- 3.2 Provide a visible and consistent channel for engagement activities

- The RDCO will be launching a new online engagement platform in Fall 2021. The platform, Bang the Table, and its EngagementHQ suite of engagement tools, centralizes community engagement, making it easy to capture, analyse, and report on district-wide engagement through one single platform.
 - Bang the Table will also enable the creation of an engagement calendar and subscribable news feeds that will allow residents and stakeholders the opportunity to learn about engagement opportunities, and be kept up-to-date on processes and feedback on projects they are interested in.
- 3.3 Identify existing communication channels within RDCO communities
- Identify stakeholder groups within RDCO communities that could become information champions in the sharing of RDCO communications.
 - Document neighbourhood association and other stakeholder groups meeting and newsletter schedules in order to convey RDCO information in a timely manner.
- 3.4 Use engagement activities to educate residents on the role of the regional district
- The role of a regional district is not clear to many residents and stakeholders. Use engagement activities to clarify the RDCO's role in a particular project or program, and how that role intersects or overlaps with other local governments or other levels of government.
- 3.5 Use plain language
- Keep communications around engagement activities clear and easy to understand. Consider using two levels of information: a simple, high level description of the engagement or background using plain language principles, and a second, deeper dive into the information and reports related to the project or program.

4. Increase diversity and inclusivity

- 4.1 Expand engagement participation beyond “the usual suspects” and identify and reach out to demographics not typically heard from
- Identify and maintain stakeholder lists for each community within RDCO, such as neighbourhood associations, sports groups, special interest groups, online discussion groups and forums, etc.
 - Identify gaps in demographic representation and seek to include those groups in future engagement.
 - Review census data to increase the understanding of people and demographics living in RDCO communities.

Appendix A: Interview and survey questions

Board questions (both survey and interview):

1. Generally speaking, how well does RDCO engage its residents and stakeholders? (scale from 1 to 10)
2. How well do you feel residents or key stakeholders understand the public participation process, or what their role is when they are asked for feedback? (scale from 1 to 10)
3. Describe your understanding of the public engagement process.
4. How timely do you feel current engagement activities are?
5. What has been your pandemic-era experience with public engagement? Have you had any positive or negative experiences with virtual tactics/town halls/ etc.?
6. Tell me about a time you felt a public engagement process worked really well. This can be an RDCO engagement, or a process from another organization. What went right? Was there anything special about it
7. Tell me about a time public engagement went sideways. Again, this can be from any organization. What happened? Was the process salvaged?
8. Do you feel there should be greater investment in public engagement at the Regional District?
9. RDCO is a vast and varied region, made up of large, urban cities, and remote and rural communities. Do you have any thoughts on how residents and stakeholders in this diverse region approach public engagement? Are there any channels or tactics that work better for one area vs another area?

Staff questions (both survey and interview):

1. Generally speaking, how well does RDCO engage its residents and stakeholders? (scale from 1 to 10)
2. How well do you feel residents or key stakeholders understand the public participation process, or what their role is when they are asked for feedback?
3. Describe your understanding of the public engagement process.
4. Is there a timely and standard process in place to initiate public consultation as part of new programs, projects, or service changes?
5. As the senior staff person responsible for the project, describe your involvement in designing public engagement activities and tactics. Was there opportunity to determine goals, phases, targeted audiences, etc., or do you do the same thing as last time?
6. What has been your pandemic-era experience with public engagement? Have you had any positive or negative experiences with virtual tactics/town halls/ etc.?
7. Tell me about a time you felt a public engagement process worked really well. This can be an RDCO engagement, or a process from another organization. What went right? Was there anything special about it
8. Tell me about a time public engagement went sideways. What happened? Was the process salvaged?
9. Do you feel there should be greater investment in public engagement at the Regional District?
10. What's your preference, or experience with, in-house vs consultant engagement support?
11. RDCO is a vast and varied region, made up of large, urban cities, and remote and rural communities. Do you have any thoughts on how residents and stakeholders in this diverse region approach public engagement?

Regional district questions:

1. Describe your role and department – how large is it, what is the reporting structure, how long has this role existed, etc.
2. Generally speaking, how well does your regional district engage your residents and stakeholders? (scale from 1 to 10)
3. How well do you feel residents or key stakeholders understand your public participation process, or what their role is when they are asked for feedback? (scale from 1 to 10)
4. Describe your process to initiate public consultation as part of new programs, projects, or service changes.
5. What tools do you have that support public engagement (such as policies, toolkits, templates, rubrics, procurement statements, etc.)
6. What tools are you missing or wish you had?
7. What has been your pandemic-era experience with public engagement? Have you had any positive or negative experiences with virtual tactics/town halls/ etc.?
8. Tell me about a time you felt a public engagement process worked really well. What went right?
9. Tell me about a time public engagement went sideways. What happened? Was the process salvaged?
10. What's your preference, or experience with, in-house vs consultant engagement support?
11. Describe your approach to engaging residents and stakeholders in a diverse region. Are there any channels or tactics that work better for one area vs another area?