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Report 2021-161

Report Title: 2022 Budget Engagement Results

Committee Name: Finance and Audit

Committee Meeting Date: October 5, 2021

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Council Meeting Date: October 21, 2020

Strategic Plan Priorities: Economic Prosperity and Innovation

Sustainable Growth

Thriving and Inclusive Communities

Leadership in Change

Recommendation

“That the Finance and Audit Committee, having considered Report 2021-161 ‘2022 Budget Engagement Results’, recommend that County Council receive the report for information, during their consideration of the 2022 Budget; and

Further That the Committee recommend that Council authorize staff to request feedback from County stakeholders regarding how to optimize public input in future years; and

Further That the Committee recommend that this report be considered as a separate item on the October 20, 2021 Northumberland County Council agenda.”

Purpose

To report on the results from Northumberland County’s 2022 Budget Public Consultations.

Background

The 2019-2023 Northumberland County Strategic Plan lists “Leadership in Change” as one of its four main priorities. Within the “Leadership in Change” pillar, the County has committed to strengthening public engagement by developing a public engagement protocol to improve community engagement in shaping County programs and services.

In previous budget cycles, staff have facilitated various combinations of Financial Framework Open Houses and surveys. The intent was to educate and engage the public on the County’s services and budgetary processes and to provide for public engagement and input into the County’s annual budget and long-term financial plan. Despite communication of the open houses via social media, the County website, newspapers, radio and media advisories participation was limited with 11 and 5 attendees at the last open houses facilitated in the years 2017 and 2018, respectively. The number of survey responses received was 2 and 1 in the years 2017 and 2018, respectively with a markedly improved participation level in 2019 at 374 respondents dropping down to 54 in 2020. Recognizing the limited participation for open houses and the extensive staff time required for planning and facilitating these, Council authorized under Council Report 2018-55 that the stakeholder consultation process be restricted to a budgetary survey only effective commencing with the 2020 budgetary cycle and staff recommended an enhanced on-line engagement for the 2022 budget.

Consultations

The budget process is developed annually by the Treasurer with input from the Finance department staff involved in developing the annual budget. Feedback received from Council, the public and the operating departments is also considered in setting priorities for infrastructure, programs, services and determining any modifications to the annual process.

Northumberland County engaged in consultation with the public on the 2022 County Budget throughout the month of August 2021, implementing a Communications & Community Engagement Plan to encourage feedback from the community. In continuous pursuit of strengthening public engagement in the budget process, the County launched a budget simulation tool as part of this year’s consultation process. The ‘Balancing Act’ tool was piloted as an opportunity to improve staff and Council’s understanding of resident and stakeholder needs, expectations, and priorities for investment of the 2022 County Budget.

Balancing Act is an interactive budget tool, enabling community members to try their hand at allocating the County budget based on how they would prioritize program, service, and infrastructure investments. This tool enabled participants to simulate changes to spending and revenue across County services, while learning about the associated service impacts.

The 2022 Budget Consultation Communications & Community Engagement Plan was structured around three objectives:

1. Inform residents and stakeholders of the County's annual budget planning and approvals process;
2. Raise awareness of the services provided by the upper-tier level of government in Northumberland;
3. Consult with residents and stakeholders to gather feedback about priorities for investment of the 2022 County Budget, to inform Council deliberation and determination.

Strategies

Strategies to achieve the objectives included:

- **Streamline:** Direct residents to the Join In Northumberland online consultation portal as the access point for the budget simulation tool, leveraging existing effort and investment to build awareness of this central source for all County-related online consultations.
- **Educate:** Include an overview of the budget planning and approvals process on the Join In Northumberland 2022 Budget Consultation Project Page. Use the budget simulation tool to identify and describe major service buckets delivered by the County and the budget assigned to each. Describe possible service-level impacts for each incremental change to these budgets. Break down financial impact of incremental changes to the average ratepayer.
- **Clarify:** List services in a way that's understandable to community members – by function rather than by overarching department responsible for the service.
- **Emphasize transparency:** Include a breakdown of the full County budget rather than a selection of core services and related expenses. Include information about revenue streams.
- **Broadly promote:** Implement a multi-channel communications campaign to broadly promote the consultation to the community and encourage participation.

Engagement Methods and Results

Tactics for promoting the 2022 Budget Consultation launched July 21, 2021 and continued throughout the duration of the consultation, which concluded August 31, 2021. The following is a summary of the primary communications and community engagement methods and results for the consultation, as aligns with the objectives:

1. Generate awareness of the 2022 Budget Consultation

- a. A presentation to County Council at the July 21, 2021 meeting of Council, including a demonstration of the budget simulation tool.
- b. An email campaign to advise stakeholders including:
 - i. Business & Entrepreneurship Centre Northumberland clients
 - ii. Tourism businesses
 - iii. Settlement services stakeholders
 - iv. Council News subscribers
 - v. Join In Northumberland portal registrants
- c. A quarter-page advertisement in three local newspapers:
 - i. Northumberland News (local circulation: 22,800 households)
 - ii. Brighton Independent (local circulation: 9,000 households)
 - iii. Community Press (local circulation: 10,371 households)
- d. A media release, and a banner on the Northumberland County website homepage linking to this media release.
 - i. **Results:**
 - Pick-up of media release by local media outlets, with 100 per cent capture of key messaging and spokesperson quotes, including:
 - Quinte News
 - Cobourg News Blog
 - Northumberland News
 - Today's Northumberland
 - Trent Hills Now
 - Toronto Star (local journalism initiative)
 - Municipal Information Network
 - 48 unique pageviews of the media release on the County website
- e. Social media promotions - social media is one of the most effective tools for amplifying the reach of County messaging. A social media campaign was implemented with a call to action to participate in the 2022 Budget Consultation by submitting a preferred budget using the new simulation tool. This campaign was published via the County's Facebook and Twitter accounts, including:
 - i. Facebook
 - One paid (boosted) post, which ran from August 3 to 31. County boosted posts are geographically and demographically targeted: they appear on Facebook timelines for those 18-65+ living within 50 miles of the Town of Cobourg, which

enables the post to reach a geography from Port Hope to Brighton to Trent Hills.

- A total of five organic (standard/no-pay) posts, shared approximately once per week.

- **Results**

- **Paid:** Reached a total of 10,192 Facebook users. From these users, the post generated 218 link clicks to the consultation page. Engagement from this post included 9 shares, 26 reactions (from six possible reactions including like, love, laugh, wow, sad and angry), and 12 comments.

Excerpts from comments received, include:

- “You need to allow tiny homes on existing properties without all the red tape that would benefit fixed income people and those that can’t find affordable housing”
 - “This past year our taxes, water, and garbage costs have gone up along with everything else. Roads always need to be repaired. Attracting business is also important.”
 - “How about cutting back on programs and concentrate on roads and bridges and making the county business friendly.”
 - “The county needs to think about putting a bridge over the railroad tracks in Brighton. Sometimes people have to wait 10 minutes to get across the tracks if 2 long long trains are going each way.”
 - “We need trails and tourism.”
 - “With The high amount of hacking going on in information security Northumberland County should have a serious plan (for IT) for itself and for all the member municipalities it supports.”
 - “Thank you NC for giving taxpayers an opportunity to take a good look at the numbers.”
- **Organic:** Five posts each reached an average of 375 Facebook users (*average given rather than total reach of all posts combined to achieve more accurate representation, given possibility of overlap between each post. Total reach likely to be higher*). From these users, the posts generated 8 link clicks, 12 shares, and 4 reactions. No comments were recorded on these posts.

ii. Twitter

- A total of five organic posts, shared approximately once per week.
 - **Results**
 - Average reach of 247 impressions per post (*average given rather than total reach of all posts combined to achieve more accurate representation, given possibility of overlap between each post. Total reach likely to be higher.*)

f. Broad distribution of print materials including:

- i. Posters for municipal libraries
- ii. Postcard handouts via Canada Post unaddressed ad mail to a random selection of addresses in each Northumberland municipality totaling approximately 9,600 apartments, houses and farms, as well as distribution via:
 - EarlyON Child and Family Centres
 - Licensed child care centres
 - Social Services and County Headquarters waiting areas
 - Golden Plough Lodge reception area

2. Inform residents and stakeholders of the County’s annual budget planning and approvals process

A project page was launched via Join In Northumberland (<https://joinin.northumberland.ca/>), Northumberland County’s online consultation portal. Join In Northumberland is a virtual public space where residents and stakeholders can learn more about current consultations and share their input to help shape County-led programs, policies and services.



This page acted as a hub for 2022 Budget Consultation information, including:

- An overview of the County's annual budget process, including phases and timelines
- An overview of – and link to – the budget simulation tool, along with other methods to provide input including:
 - Leaving a comment in the comments tab of the project page
 - Emailing comments and/or questions to finance@northumberland.ca
- Staff reports and background documents
- Videos describing County services
- Contact information for consultation leads

Results

- There were 310 unique visits to the Join In Northumberland project page during consultation period.
- Eight visitors posted comments to the project page (see Appendix B).

3. Raise awareness of the services provided by the upper-tier level of government in Northumberland

The Balancing Act budget simulation tool for Northumberland County was built in collaboration with all County departments, with staff from each area assembling details for inclusion in the tool.

The tool presented a breakdown of the services provided by the County, including a description of each service, and the 2022 budget identified for each service (based on the 1.5 per cent target levy increase directed by Council in June 2021).

Results

- 220 people accessed the Balancing Act Budget Simulation Tool during consultation period, spending an average of 11 minutes and 58 seconds on the site.

4. Gather feedback about priorities for investment of the 2022 County Budget

The primary call-to-action to community members for the 2022 Budget Consultation was to complete the simulation tool and submit their preferred 2022 County Budget. The public was invited to share whether they would increase, decrease, or maintain the proposed spending for each County service identified, with each option presenting details about the potential impacts to the service.

This tool went live on Tuesday, August 3, and remained open for the month of August, closing at midnight on August 31, 2021.

Results

- A total of 77 people completed the simulation.

Legislative Authority/Risk Considerations

The Municipal Act Regulation 289 Yearly Budgets, Upper-Tier.

Risk Considerations:

There is a risk in any public engagement exercise that the results are misinterpreted and/or that those who provide feedback do not represent the average needs and desires of the broader group. In this instance, we had 77 individuals complete the simulation out of a population of approximately 86,000 (2016 Census) and the risk would be to assume that the needs and desires of this very small group automatically represent that of all County residents. There is also the risk of dismissing the results since only a small number of County stakeholders participated, so it is important to strike a balance between the two in order to ensure that those who participated feel that their feedback is valued.

There is also the risk that the individuals who provide feedback do not fully understand the scope of the services provided by the County, as well as the Legislated responsibilities of the County, thereby possibly trying to cut programs and services that the County is mandated to provide. We received feedback related to services provided by the lower tiers which would indicate that there is a lack of understanding in the community about what is an upper tier vs a lower tier responsibility.

There is always a risk that the amount and effort expended in order to facilitate these types of engagement will be high compared to the feedback/value received. Although there is always this risk, in order to be open and transparent we do need to continue to attempt this type of engagement, however as we have now attempted many different methods of engagement (in-person, social media, email, newsletter, interactive budget simulation tool), we will need to refocus our efforts next year to ensure we are getting more community involvement.

Finally, there is the risk that individuals are focusing on issues in their community/municipality only, so the information could be skewed based on the number of individuals who respond from each municipality.

Discussion/Options

The Balancing Act budget simulation data was split into two categories; Revenue and Spending. Participants were not required to “balance” the budget in an attempt to achieve higher participation rates and to ensure that engagement was as easy as possible. A bar at the top of the screen indicated whether budgets were in a surplus (green) or deficit (red) position to simulate the difficult balancing exercise that must be done during each budget cycle.

Revenue

Participants could select from three revenue sub-categories; Property Taxes, Grants & Subsidies and User Fees, and from there they could increase or decrease in 1% increments. Participants were able to decrease all categories to \$0 and increase as much as they wanted, with the exception of Grants & Subsidies and Fixed User Fees, which were locked to show that they were mandatory.

Results:

Property Taxes

There were 642 total clicks (which represent non-submitted sessions) with 54% of those clicks increasing property taxes and 46% decreasing property taxes. The average clicked increased amount per session was \$282,988 while the average clicked decreased amount per session was \$25,026. The average amount that the non-submitted sessions increased was \$257,962 higher than the average decrease by non-submitted sessions.

There were 77 submitted sessions and out of those, the average amount submitted for property taxes was \$61,250,417, which represented a reduction of \$63,703 or 0.1% of the proposed property taxes.

Grants & Subsidies

As mentioned previously, Grants & Subsidies was locked so participants were unable to make any changes to this category. Although they were unable to make changes, participants clicked "more info" 27 times.

User Fees

\$13.6M was locked as it is considered "Fixed User Fees & Other Incomes." For the "Discretionary User Fees" that were able to be increased/decreased, there were 591 aggregate clicks (non-submitted sessions) with 68% of those increasing User Fees and 32% decreasing user fees. The average non-submitted increased amount per session was \$118,286, while the average non-submitted decreased amount per session was \$7,271.

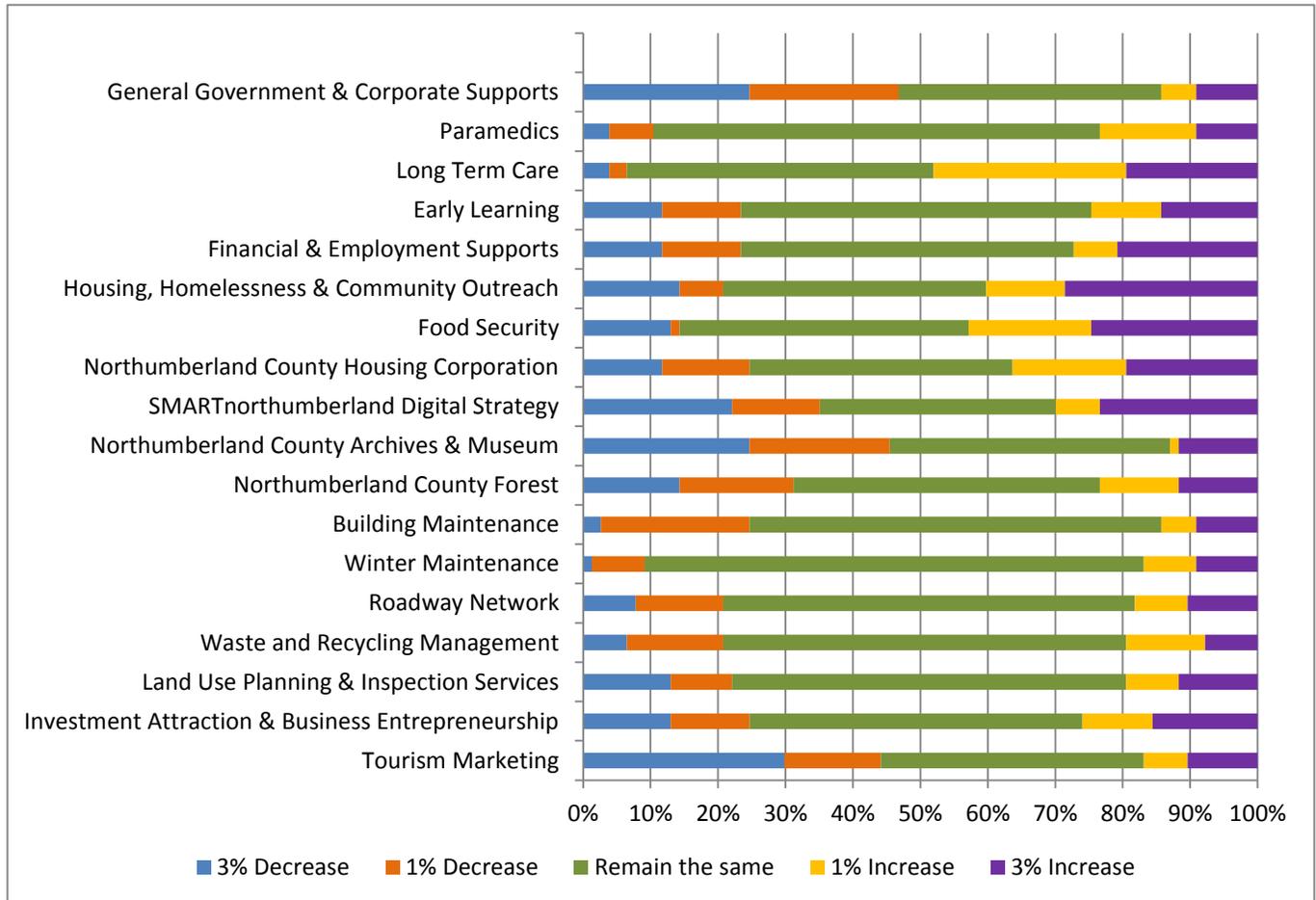
Of the 77 submitted sessions, the average submitted amount for User Fees was \$20,301,408 which represented an increase to proposed user fees of \$184,408 or 0.9%.

Spending

Spending was set up differently from the revenue category. Under the spending heading there were eleven spending categories, with some being broken down into sub-categories; General Government & Corporate Supports, Community Health (Paramedics & Long Term Care), Community & Social Services (Early Learning, Financial & Employment Supports, Housing, Homelessness & Community Outreach, Food Security, NCHC), Economic Development (Tourism Marketing, Investment Attraction & Business Entrepreneurship, Land Use Planning & Inspection Services), Tourism & Land Planning, Waste & Recycling Management, Roads & Bridges (Roadway Network, Winter Maintenance), Facilities & Property Management (Building Maintenance & Major Construction Projects), Northumberland County Forest, Northumberland

County Archives & Museum, External Transfers and SMARTnorthumberland. Participants were given five options to choose from under each sub-category of spending; increase proposed spending by 3%, increase proposed spending by 1%, keep proposed spending levels, reduce proposed spending by 1% and reduce proposed spending by 3%.

Results:



Note: Due to the nature of spending in Major Construction Projects and External Transfers these categories were included for information only and were not able to be adjusted

The chart above is useful for displaying how the budget was allocated by respondents to each service area. This is representative of the respondents' prioritization based on incremental decreases, increases or maintaining the proposed spending towards balancing the budget within the simulation tool. As displayed in the chart, the service areas with the largest proportion of respondents who selected decreases to spending (1% or 3%) were General Government (47%), Northumberland County Museum and Archives (45%) and Tourism Marketing (44%). The service areas that received the largest proportion of increases to spending (1% or 3%) were Long-term Care (48%), Food Security (43%), Housing, Homelessness and Community Outreach (40%) and Northumberland County Housing Corporation (36%). On average, the largest proportion of respondents at 50% chose to maintain the proposed spending level increase within each service area representative of the Council approved target of

1.5%. On average, the overall proportion that chose to decrease the proposed spending was 25% as was the proportion increasing spending.

General Government & Corporate Supports

The average non-submitted session increase was \$17,522, while the average non-submitted session decrease was \$52,286.

The average submitted amount was \$10,617,820, a decrease of \$45,995 or 0.4%.

Community Health

The average non-submitted session increase was \$46,932, while the average non-submitted session decrease was \$19,206.

The average submitted amount was \$28,503,407, an increase of \$44,027 or 0.2%.

Community & Social Services

The average non-submitted session increase was \$40,250, while the average non-submitted session decrease was \$35,682.

The average submitted amount was \$32,287,696, an increase of \$26,131 or 0.08%.

Economic Development, Tourism & Land Planning

The average non-submitted session increase was \$3,947, while the average non-submitted session decrease was \$4,811.

The average submitted amount was \$3,316,899, a decrease of \$2,691 or 0.08%.

Waste & Recycling Management

The average non-submitted session increase was \$9,002, while the average non-submitted session decrease was \$14,390.

The average submitted amount was \$15,285,121, an increase of \$916 or 0.01%.

Roads & Bridges

The average non-submitted session increase was \$39,063, while the average non-submitted session decrease was \$27,039.

The average submitted amount was \$22,938,784, an increase of \$8,189 or 0.04%.

Facilities & Property Management

The average non-submitted session increase was \$4,907, while the average non-submitted session decrease was \$7,503.

The average submitted amount was \$5,044,279, an increase of \$609 or 0.01%.

Northumberland County Forest

The average non-submitted session increase was \$1,407, while the average non-submitted session decrease was \$3,021.

The average submitted amount was \$801,852, a decrease of \$853 or 0.1%.

Northumberland County Archives & Museum

The average non-submitted session increase was \$851, while the average non-submitted session decrease was \$2,371.

The average submitted amount was \$357,210, a decrease of \$2,100 or 0.6%.

External Transfers

This category was locked so no changes could be made. It was included for information only.

SMARTnorthumberland

The average non-submitted session increase was \$381, while the average non-submitted session decrease was \$901.

The average submitted amount was \$152,210, a decrease of \$40 or 0.03%.

Inclusive in the simulation tool was a question specific to if the respondent would support the request from Northumberland Hills Hospital and Campbellford Memorial Hospital to provide \$1,000,000 a year over 10 years totaling \$10,000,000 in levy generated funds towards financing capital initiatives. Of the 77 respondents to the survey, 36 did not support the request to add hospital funding to the levy, 32 were supportive and 9 were undecided. Of the 77 respondents, 24 people provided comments. Respondents who did not support adding hospital funding to the levy provided 20 of the 24 comments. The majority of these comments focused on the fact that healthcare is a provincial responsibility and should be fully funded by the province. Comments received are provided in Appendix B.

Financial Impact

Although the 2022 Balancing Act Budget Simulation does not have a quantifiable financial impact, public input is a key component in the County's long-term financial planning framework in establishing priorities and decision making.

Member Municipality Impacts

N/A

Conclusion

The 2022 Budget Consultations, including the Balancing Act Budget Simulation provided a means for public engagement in the County's long term financial planning model. With 374 responses to the budget survey in 2019, 54 in 2020 and 77 completed simulations in 2021, the County will need to determine what the preferred method of public engagement is in order to ensure that this is a meaningful exercise in developing priorities for the annual Northumberland County budget. To achieve this, staff are proposing to engage with stakeholders requesting feedback on how to optimize future budget years public input.

Attachments

1. Appendix A – Demographics
2. Appendix B - Comments