



TOWN OF
HALTON HILLS

REPORT

REPORT TO: Mayor Bonnette and Members of Council

REPORT FROM: Alex Fuller, Director of Communications

DATE: April 23, 2021

REPORT NO.: ADMIN-2021-0019

RE: Virtual Event Protocols

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT Report No. ADMIN-2021-0019 dated April 23, 2021 regarding Virtual Event Protocols be received:

AND FURTHER THAT Council approve the protocol set out within this report for use as a general framework, and authorize staff to update and amend this protocol as required;

AND FURTHER THAT staff continue to review and assess how virtual events can be used to both supplement and enhance in-person events, post-pandemic.

BACKGROUND:

New health and safety protocols due to the COVID-19 pandemic have resulted in gathering restrictions and cancellation of many in-person events. As a result, Town staff across the organization have implemented new ways to deliver services in a virtual environment.

One of these areas is public consultation. Recognizing the municipality's commitment to engaging the community along with legislative responsibilities, and the anticipation that virtual consultation will continue to be utilized post pandemic, staff was tasked with reviewing the current processes and developing protocols.

COMMENTS:

Elements of successful public engagement

To develop the protocol recommendations for hosting virtual events, staff recognized the need to look at the factors that constitute a successful public engagement. Starting with the Town's Public Engagement Charter a successful consultation would adhere to

the three pillars of transparency, notification and participation. As such, there are several contributing factors for determining the success of a public consultation campaign including outreach and promotion tactics and engagement and awareness as measured from various sources (e.g. website hits, participation, views, shares on the Town's digital channels, subscriber growth etc.). Additional evaluation measures include attendance numbers and visits to project pages on the Town's online engagement platform letstalkhaltonhills.ca.

The following chart is provided for information only and illustrates i) public acceptance of virtual events as illustrated by high attendance numbers and ii) the effectiveness of the online engagement platform in generating strong public participation and facilitating two-way dialogue. It should be noted that there is no clear comparison to be made between attendance numbers at in-person and online events given the variables that can impact this such as the popularity of topic, whether there is a vested stakeholder group etc.

2020 DATES	EVENT	# People	# Visits Letstalk
	blue = in-person event green = virtual event		
Jan 29/20	PIC - Young Street (Acton) Planned Reconstruction	8	N/A
Feb 13/20	PIC - Fairy Lake Dam Rehabilitation, Acton	16	1,100
Feb 27/20	PIC - 22 Side Road Phase 2 Reconstruction	18	N/A
Mar 3/20	Public Meeting - Privately Owned Tree Management Strategy	60	876
June 9	Virtual PIC - Town-wide Parking Study	51	1,600
June 10/20	Virtual Open House - Sustainable Neighbourhood Action Plan #2	41	1,800
Oct 28/20	Virtual Open House - Glen Williams Secondary Plan Review	72	1,500
Nov 16/20	Virtual PIC - Employ HH Premier Gateway Phase 2 Secondary Plan	30	632
Dec 1/20	Virtual Low Carbon Transition Strategy Kick-Off Webinar	60	194
Jan 20/21	Virtual Open House - Glen Williams Secondary Plan Review	72	1,500
Jan 27/21	Virtual PIC - Employ HH Premier Gateway Phase 2 Secondary Plan	30	632
Mar 31/21	Virtual Open House – Affordable Housing	95	707
Mar 31/21	Virtual Open House – 60 John Street	56	165

Staff experience with virtual events

A survey issued to 12 staff members who led virtual consultation events indicated strong support for continuing with this type of engagement (when public gatherings are permitted) but not to the exclusion of hosting in-person events.

Benefits to hosting virtual events include:

- Extension of event content lifecycle (sessions are recorded and posted)
- Strong participation from public
- Reduction in cost (versus an in-person event)
- Convenience and flexibility
- Significant reduction in carbon footprint.

Cons to hosting virtual events were noted as:

- Less personal interaction,
- Challenges of keeping attendees engaged and
- Limited or no internet connectivity.

Staff believes that going forward, it may be appropriate for some in-person events to be replaced with a virtual event; that there may be occasions to hold a virtual event concurrently with an in-person event and that some events will continue to be held as in-person only. Regardless of whether the public engagement is held virtually or in-person, all projects requiring consultation should leverage the Town's online platform letstalkhaltonhills.ca.

Council comments on virtual events

Over the last year, some members of Council shared comments with the Acting CAO, including:

- A request for clarity as to the role of elected officials at virtual events
- Having opportunities to interact with participants
- Having the ability to pose questions during sessions

Current Process & Proposed Guiding Principles

Communications staff works with project team members to prepare agendas, remarks, 'housekeeping instructions', facilitate rehearsals and provide technical support during virtual events. To date, virtual consultation events have not adhered to strict protocols for agendas or Council participation; these decisions have been made on a per event basis.

Recognizing that different events warrant different levels of participation, there must be flexibility in applying a protocol. The following guiding principles have been developed based on the experiences to date and provide a basis for establishing a protocol:

1. Virtual events may/may not have a facilitator; role is useful if issue is contentious.
2. As the head of Council, the Mayor is always asked if he wishes to speak.
3. The Mayor or facilitator recognizes Council members and/or VIPS in attendance.
4. If a Councillor is attached to a committee/working group, he/she is given the option to provide remarks concerning the mandate or progress of the committee.
5. If the issue is ward-specific and there is no related committee/working group, Ward Councillors may have a role (to be discussed) or may choose to remain as a participant.
6. The Mayor and Councillors should have the opportunity to speak if desired; this can be built into the agenda (not shared with the public). They may choose to exercise this option either before or directly following an open Q & A session with the public.

Protocol Example Applied in Agenda

Based on the guiding principles, the following example sets out the format for holding a virtual event:

- Facilitator (if used) welcomes attendees and introduces or recognizes the Mayor (plus Councillors and VIPS)
- *OPTIONAL: Mayor brings greetings
- Facilitator (if used) introduces Councillor (as appropriate)
- *OPTIONAL: Councillor(s) attached to related committee/working group or ward-specific pending issue, provide remarks
- Facilitator (if used) hands over to staff/consultant
- Presentation (staff or consultant)
- Break out room activities (if applicable)
- *OPTIONAL: scenario 1- pending subject matter/agenda: time allotted for Mayor/Councillors to speak (if desired)
- Open session for public Q & A
- *OPTIONAL: scenario 2 - pending subject matter/agenda: time allotted for Mayor/Councillors to speak (if desired)

* Mayor/Councillors may pre-determine whether they wish to listen and not speak. This should be arranged prior to the event and will be noted in opening remarks.

RELATIONSHIP TO STRATEGIC PLAN:

This report supports the following Town of Halton Hills' Strategic Plan goal of: 'Fiscal and Corporate Management', supporting the fiscal and corporate management priority of 'communications.'

FINANCIAL IMPACT:

There are no direct financial implications related to this report.

CONSULTATION:

A sub-committee including the Director of Planning Policy, Director of Parks and Open Space and the Sr. Manager of Climate Change and Asset Management helped develop the proposed protocol which was also reviewed by the Senior Management Team.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

There was no public engagement required.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS:

The Town is committed to implementing our Community Sustainability Strategy, Imagine Halton Hills. Doing so will lead to a higher quality of life.

The report's recommendations advance the Strategy's implementation.

This report supports the pillar of Sustainability.

COMMUNICATIONS:

Following approval by Town Council, information will be rolled out to staff involved in public consultations.

CONCLUSION:

The Town's experience with hosting virtual public consultation events has been positive and participation from the public indicates acceptance of this new form of engagement. Staff recognizes that virtual events are not intended to totally replace all in-person consultation but rather, will be considered on a per-event basis as a viable option.

The protocols outlined in this report provide a flexible framework for preparing agendas for virtual consultation events. As this format is continually evolving and staff become more experienced with each event, these protocols will be updated and amended as required.

Reviewed and Approved by,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'C. Mills', with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Chris Mills, Acting Chief Administrative Officer