



REPORT

TO: Mayor Bonnette and Members of Council

FROM: Alex Fuller, Director of Communications

DATE: April 14, 2022

REPORT NO.: ADMIN-2022-0016

SUBJECT: Virtual Consultation

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT Report No. ADMIN-2022-0016 dated April 14, 2022 regarding virtual consultation be received;

AND FURTHER THAT the Town continue to offer public consultation in a virtual or in person format as determined by the project manager in consultation with Communications staff, using proposed criteria as a guide;

AND FURTHER THAT Communications create a Staff Guide to Public Consultation Events;

AND FURTHER THAT the consultation approach for significant projects be included in the Terms of Reference which will be approved by Council;

AND FURTHER THAT concurrent hybrid consultation (simultaneous virtual and in person events) be selectively used for topics not requiring break out groups, recognizing resource requirements, site and technology restrictions;

AND FURTHER THAT staff review the costs of equipping rooms with technology to enhance the virtual consultation experience;

AND FURTHER THAT Communications and project staff continue to track the time required to host virtual consultation events and review resource requirements for consideration in the 2023 budget.

AND FURTHER THAT staff report back to Council on the time and resource requirements for hosting virtual consultation events.

KEY POINTS:

The following are key points for consideration with respect to this report:

- The Town's public engagement program has evolved from hosting in person events to gather public input, to using technology to deliver information and receive public input.
- The Town's engagement platform 'letstalkhaltonhills.ca' is an integral component of all consultations providing a user-friendly site to solicit public input.
- Holding live public engagement events in a virtual environment using Zoom has been proven (on the basis of high attendance) to be an effective approach to soliciting input from the community and should be continued.
- Survey input from residents indicates strong support for continuing with virtual consultations; 94% of respondents selected 'neutral' to 'very happy' about their overall experience attending a virtual consultation.
- While Communications staff is involved in all public consultations, virtual events in particular, require heavy support to deliver a seamless production; the staff committee was in agreement that additional support for delivering consultations would be beneficial to all involved in these events.
- Survey feedback indicated that people liked both in person and virtual consultations for different reasons and that the Town should continue to offer public engagement in both formats.
- Each consultation is unique with many different considerations including subject matter, community interest, political environment and resources; as such, the decision as to the consultation approach should be left with the project lead in discussion with communications staff, using suggested criteria as a guide.

BACKGROUND AND DISCUSSION:

The engagement platform 'letstalkhaltonhills.ca' is the pillar of the Town's public consultation program. Since the inception of the platform, participation has grown steadily. From 2017 to present, the site has been used for 126 projects which collectively received 114,500 visits and engaged 10,100 people who reviewed project material, accessed the various tools to provide input and asked questions of staff.

Last year, the engagement platform hosted over 40 projects which garnered 24,700 visits from the public and engaged 2,700 people.

In addition to the letstalk platform, staff conduct public consultation in many different live formats including stakeholder meetings, pop up events, focus groups and other in person events (e.g., open houses and PICs).

Since the onset of the pandemic in March 2020, the Town changed its approach from holding live, in person events to hosting live events in a virtual environment (e.g., virtual PICs) using the Zoom platform.

Council has received two memos on virtual consultation; Report Admin-2021-0019, titled 'Protocol for Virtual Events' and Memorandum Admin-2021-0008, titled 'Virtual Event Guidelines for Staff and the Community'. This report follows up on Council's direction to review and assess the viability of continuing to host public consultations in a virtual environment, recognizing that the Town will be able to resume holding in person public engagement events as deemed safe and appropriate.

From April 2020 – April 2022, the Town delivered 20 virtual consultation events, with almost 1100 participants. Each event presented an opportunity for continuous improvement to enhance the user experience. As a result, staff developed protocols to support the delivery of seamless and impactful online consultation events that are interesting, informative and participatory. Protocols include creating special trivia quizzes as a preamble to the featured topic; articulating staff roles and using an MC as necessary to smooth presentation transitions.

Virtual Consultation Staff Advisory Committee (VCSAC)

Public engagement is an integral component of municipal service delivery at Halton Hills involving staff across the corporation. As such, the strategy for determining the Town's recommended direction on virtual consultations, included striking a staff advisory committee and issuing surveys to the public and various stakeholders.

The Virtual Consultation Staff Advisory Committee was formed with cross departmental representatives to facilitate the development and review of the survey input and identify and discuss other issues and opportunities. Led by Communications, the VCSAC held 5 meetings from December 2021 to March 2022.

VCSAC Objectives:

- Determine whether the Town's virtual consultation program has been successful through the perspectives of residents, Council members and staff.
- Review and analyze survey inputs to guide the future direction of the virtual consultation program when in-person experiences resume.
- Review and recommend technology and human resource requirements.
- Understand the experiences, best practices and direction of other municipalities.

VCSAC Tasks:

- Review content of surveys to 4 stakeholder groups.
- Confirm the protocols developed by Communications for hosting online consultation events.
- Review and confirm analysis of all surveys and prepare recommendations.
- Develop criteria for determining whether a consultation event should be held online, in-person or as a hybrid event (both in-person and online concurrently).
- Test out a concurrent (in-person and virtual) hybrid event through a mock exercise featuring both in-person and virtual participation.
- Investigate required resources (personnel and technology) for hosting concurrent hybrid events.
- Review the draft staff report of findings and recommendations.

Technology Review and Recommendations

A Technical Sub-committee of VCSAC led by I.T. staff was formed to investigate:

- The best platform to deliver virtual consultation events.
- A/V requirements for hosting virtual or concurrent hybrid events.
- Identifying sites for future technology installations and the criteria for choosing these sites.

The findings and recommendations of the sub-committee were as follows:

- It is beneficial to the public to use the same platform (Zoom) for Council meetings as well as virtual public consultations.
- Several municipal sites were identified for hosting different concurrent hybrid events however would likely be cost prohibitive. (Note: Council Chambers cost over \$150,000 to be outfitted properly with cameras and other technology.)
- The Town does not have A/V expertise on staff and would be dependent on vendors to provide quotes and expertise.

Concurrent Hybrid Mock Consultation Exercise

VCSAC members as well as additional staff from Clerks and Communications, participated in a mock exercise focused on a contentious issue that included both online and in person participants. The purpose of the exercise was to test the feasibility of delivering a concurrent hybrid consultation through a role-playing, hands-on experience. The Council Chambers was used as the meeting site given the availability of technology (cameras, large screen). The exercise included a presentation with several speakers, a number of 'residents' participating in-person and virtually, break out room meetings, a large group discussion and a question-and-answer period with virtual and in person

speakers. An MC from Communications was utilized to bridge the gap between the two sets of attendees.

Participants reviewed the experience and determined that:

- Concurrent hybrid events are possible but are resource heavy due to the complexity of delivering in two formats.
- Concurrent hybrid events are positive in that all attendees receive the same information at the same time and provide an efficient use of staff resources as they do not need to host a second event.
- Given current technical restrictions (i.e., the Council Chambers are the only available venue) and as such, the concurrent hybrid format should be used selectively and only for events that do not require breakout groups.
- The level of effort to hold a concurrent hybrid event approaches or exceeds that of statutory public meetings held as part of Council proceedings.

Public and Stakeholder Consultation

Using the Town's engagement platform letstalkhaltonhills.ca, four surveys were developed: a public survey for residents and three surveys issued to specific stakeholder groups (Town Council, staff and municipalities). The survey questions were not identical for each group though many of the questions asked of residents and the Councillors were similar.

Results from the resident survey have been attached as an appendix.

While 141 residents took the survey, not all questions were answered by all people. Forty-six per cent of the residents advised that they had never attended a virtual consultation.

Overall, comments from residents supported virtual consultations. People cited the ease of attendance, accessibility, not having to travel and enjoying the 'at home' experience. Of the over 70 residents who responded to the question about overall experience, 61% were 'happy' to 'very happy', 32% chose 'neutral' and 7% were 'unhappy' to 'very unhappy'.

Residents also overwhelmingly (81%) said they found the information they were looking for when they attended the event and 68% of respondents advised that they felt comfortable asking questions in a virtual environment, while 32% did not.

For those who were not in favour of virtual consultations, many people cited poor internet along with technology challenges, concerns with not being able to read the body language of others or have one-on-one discussions as is available during in person events.

Similarly, members of Council reported positively on their overall experience with attending virtual consultations while poor internet connectivity and one-on-one discussions were also cited.

Residents and council members were asked the question, 'When in-person engagement is deemed safe, how likely are you to attend an in-person consultation event hosted by the Town of Halton Hills?' Interestingly, 26% of residents stated they would not attend an in-person event. Note: as this was the first survey to ask this question, we do not know whether the response reflects a change in behaviour since the onset of the pandemic.

Staff Consultation

A survey was directed to 32 staff who had previously participated in a virtual consultation. Staff was asked their thoughts on the level of participation by residents (as compared to an in-person event); the quality of the input received and to provide any other general comments. Below are some key findings from the staff survey:

- Over 90% of staff respondents felt that the quality of input from residents at virtual consultations has been good to excellent.
- Seventy-eight per cent of staff respondents felt that residents were just as engaged or more engaged at a virtual event versus an in-person event.
- Staff comments while mixed, indicated strong support for continuing with virtual consultations though some staff noted that certain projects (depending on the subject matter) may benefit more from an in-person event to facilitate personal interactions.

Based on all of the input received, there is strong support for continuing to hold public consultations in a virtual format.

STRATEGIC PLAN ALIGNMENT:

This report is administrative in nature and does not have an impact on the Town's Strategic Plan.

RELATIONSHIP TO CLIMATE CHANGE:

Virtual consultations remove the need for driving to an event. As such, this report impacts and/or helps address climate change and the Town's Net Zero target through climate mitigation.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT:

Public Engagement has been conducted as follows: online survey.

INTERNAL CONSULTATION:

The work of the Virtual Consultation Staff Advisory Committee was the basis for this report. The presentation and recommendations were discussed with the Senior Management Team. A staff survey was also completed as noted above.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

This report has the potential to require funding in a future budget year and therefore needs to be referred to budget committee for tracking purposes.

Reviewed and approved by,

Chris Mills, Chief Administrative Officer