

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT TASK FORCE

Report to Committee of the Whole, September 24, 2018

Purpose of Report

To review for City Council the three community engagement pilot projects held to date and make some recommendations for Council's consideration going forward.

Introduction:

The Community Engagement Task Force (CETF) consisting of residents, City staff and members of City Council was put together following a council motion in 2016 to create a public engagement pilot program to *"further community engagement and public conversation"* in a less formal setting than a Council or Committee of the Whole meeting.

To date, the CETF has held three pilot community engagement sessions. Pilot Project Session #1, in November 2017, was an open space technology discussion centered around *"Building Nanaimo for the Future: What are your priorities"* where five topics chosen by the community at large were debated and discussed in a round table format. Pilot Project Session #2, held in April 2018, and utilized a *"micro town hall"* format with participants bringing their own questions that they wished to specifically ask of members of City Council again in a round table set-up. Pilot Project Session #3, held in July 2018, demonstrated a collaborative type of community engagement where residents partnered with the city in developing an action plan to meet an issue of importance to them which, in this case, was *"Homelessness: how do we increase understanding and move towards action?"* This session was introduced by a series of panelists sharing their experiences about homelessness from a variety of perspectives.

Evaluation of the pilot session methodologies by attendees:

Participants in all three sessions overwhelmingly were satisfied both with the methodology of engagement and the outcome. At Session #1, attendees appreciated the opportunities provided to speak as well as the dialogue with other participants and they felt that their opinion mattered. For future pilots, those evaluating this session, wanted to see more in-depth discussion on fewer topics which aimed towards finding solutions to the challenges identified.

At Session #2, participants appreciated the non-threatening atmosphere, the Q&A format; and the low-pressure intimate conversations. Most importantly, was the opportunity for face to face interaction with Councillors in an informal setting. This allowed participants to feel more comfortable engaging with elected officials; to see them as "real" people who were friendly and passionate about their work and had a high commitment to the city of Nanaimo. One resident had never before met a Councillor in person. Those persons who acted as table facilitators also felt that it was a "really meaningful event" and a "well worthwhile exercise" that they were happy to be a part of.

At Session #3, participants appreciated the short presentations made by the panelists; hearing diverse points of view and range of insights; and the sense of shared purpose and compassion shown by all attendees. For future pilot program community engagement events, respondents stated that it was a good model and they were pleased with the process particularly the panel presentations although they would have liked to have seen more attendees who were living the homeless experience. Those completing the evaluation appreciated the attendance by members of City Council, noting that "it's powerful to have City Government present at meetings dealing with important community issues" and "I was empowered to know that I was not alone in how I feel about people on the streets."

In all the sessions, the majority of those who completed the evaluation form went away feeling that they had influence in identifying which topics were important to them; that their participation was welcome and respected; and that the experience itself was of value.

Results from the pilot sessions to date:

The pilot sessions provide not only useful insights into community engagement methodologies but also in presenting recommendations about specific issues which are important to the residents of Nanaimo.

In Pilot Session #1, for example, the goal was to obtain feedback on issues of concern to residents and the promise was to listen and acknowledge their concerns. While a complete set of notes from the discussion is on the City's website, the following conclusions from the session provide useful insight for consideration when Council deliberates on its strategic priorities:¹

1. Downtown Nanaimo is important to this community and support should be provided to stimulate development;
2. The need to enhance biking/ walking/ transit in Nanaimo through connectivity and improving safety on community streets is seen as a priority;
3. Nanaimo needs to assess the need for a one-stop recycling facility;
4. An affordable housing strategy is a must;
5. We need to ensure that new development, including south downtown waterfront reflects community values; and
6. We need to provide a more concerted and direct effort to support economic development.

One of the round tables at this session was specifically devoted to community engagement resulting in a lively and focused discussion on how to improve current practices. Some of these important points were able to be taken into consideration by the CETF in pilot projects #2 and #3 and will be considered for pilot project #4.

- Strengthening of neighbourhood associations to encourage citizen representation
 - Existing institutions that are not being fully utilized
 - Need to make sure that associations are credible, i.e. have annual meetings and elections
- More meaningful, authentic communication.
 - Try new technology to get ongoing feedback from the residents
 - Too many requests from the city for engagement; needs to be prioritized
 - Need consultation at the implementation as well as vision level
- Have a culture where asking questions makes you feel heard and respected at all levels
 - Emails being sent without responses
 - Speaking before Council often comes too late in the process to have any meaningful impact
 - Speaking to Council itself needs to lead to more opportunity for engagement
 - Allow questions by observers at committee levels

In Pilot Session #2, while a specific count of the nature and type of questions was not made, many of the issues raised revolved around housing for the homeless; development of 1 Port Drive; relations with Snuneymuxw; and the 2018-2019 budget with a few questions relating to better walking, cycling and transit and proposed and approved parking variances.

¹ <https://www.nanaimo.ca/docs/your-government/boards-and-committees/nov-23-discussion-notes-transcribed.pdf>
<https://www.nanaimo.ca/get-involved/community-engagement/community-engagement-archive/public-engagement-pilot-archive>

Pilot Session #3 was devoted entirely to an understanding of the issue of homelessness. Out of the discussion, seven themes emerged for action:²

1. Building an inclusive community;
2. Overcoming fear;
3. Addressing gaps in health care;
4. Changing how we look at housing and homing solutions;
5. Targeting supports for youth;
6. Addressing the economic impacts of homelessness; and
7. Improving processes for public engagement and accountability of all players.

One specific action recommended under theme #7 was indicative of the tenor of the conversation during the entire session. It asked for City leadership and key stakeholders to take out a full-page advertisement in the newspaper which:

- acknowledges that homelessness is a big issue in our community;
- commits to having regular conversations about this issue with the community, establishing a set of shared values, and communicating an action plan about homelessness.
- Shares stories of how individuals became homeless as a means of re-humanizing those who are living this experience so that we can collectively begin to see ourselves in the issue.

Looking forward to Pilot Project Session #4

The CETF mandate was to undertake four pilot projects of which three have now been completed. The CETF has been giving some preliminary consideration to the format of the fourth session which is scheduled to take place in November 2018. Two of our engagement objectives for this session are to:

- Define and discuss community issues and needs at a neighbourhood level; and
- Involve youth of Nanaimo more actively in the process.

At the first Pilot Project Session, a recommendation from those discussing community engagement was the need to strengthen neighbourhood associations to encourage citizen representation in the engagement process. Organizing a session geographically around neighbourhoods would provide an opportunity for a diverse group of residents of each neighbourhood to identify the issues that are of concern to them and perhaps are common across neighbourhoods. This would also provide incoming City Council members with an opportunity to more fully understand needs at a neighbourhood level before embarking on its next strategic plan.

The CETF is also conscious that the majority of participants at our sessions have been more than fifty years old and, as a result, we are missing an active component of our population. To encourage their participation, the CETF is giving thought to having the session moderated by a member of the Young Professionals of Nanaimo and to seek table moderators from the City of Nanaimo's Youth Advisory Committee.

Conclusion to date:

The CETF strongly believes that through these pilot projects, new avenues have opened up within the city for community engagement. Some city departments have followed up with engagements of their own using, for example, the open space technology developed in Session #1. The use of micro town halls in Session #2 proved to be a very successful method of direct citizen to politician interaction and could be used in any number of situations and perhaps several times a year. Session #3 proved that we could have a compassionate

² <https://www.nanaimo.ca/docs/default-document-library/july-28-2018-feedback.pdf>
<https://www.nanaimo.ca/docs/default-document-library/cetf-session-3-report-july-28-2018.pdf>

conversation in our community around a very complex, contentious and combative issue and that residents of Nanaimo are eager and willing to be an integral part of solutions for people without homes.

What the CETF has determined as most important in all of these pilot projects is that the goal of the specific community engagement must be fully understood before embarking on the methodology of consultation. Many other communities have come to this conclusion and have embraced, for example, the spectrum of public participation developed by the International Association of Public Participation as a basis for determining the level of community engagement required in a specific situation and subsequently the method of engagement.³

The CETF also believes that to be really successful community engagement needs to be an integral component of the culture of an organization and come early enough in the process to have meaningful and authentic impact. As expressed in the discussion on community engagement at Session #1, a welcoming culture is one where “asking questions makes you feel heard and respected at all levels.” The CETF believes that it could have a role to play in assisting City Council and staff in defining and implementing Nanaimo’s community engagement culture.

Recommendations:

The CETF was established under the mandate of City Council and is obviously subject to the pleasure of Council. Accordingly, we offer these recommendations for your consideration:

1. That the CETF continue with planning and implementation of Pilot Project #4 to be held in November 2018 with one of the outcomes to be recommendations for improving community engagement processes; and
2. That the CETF submit a report to council early in 2019 recommending ways and means of implementing a culture of engagement within the City of Nanaimo

³ [https://iap2canada.ca/Resources/Documents/0702-Foundations-Spectrum-MW-rev2%20\(1\).pdf](https://iap2canada.ca/Resources/Documents/0702-Foundations-Spectrum-MW-rev2%20(1).pdf)