



## Public Participation Strategy Project FAQ

The Town of Okotoks recognizes the importance of engaging residents on a wide range of issues, projects, and services. The public is more connected, educated and informed than ever before and residents would like to be more informed and involved in decisions that affect them.

Therefore, how decisions are made is becoming increasingly as important as the decisions themselves. When members of the public are able to participate effectively, Council can be more confident that the decisions it makes reflect the community's' priorities, values and needs, and that services reflect community expectations.

A public participation strategy will establish clear processes and guidelines to improve and increase public participation in municipal decision-making and service delivery, and will ensure Council and staff are continually considering this input.

### 1. What is public participation?

Public participation includes any efforts to inform and include the public in an organization's decision-making or problem-solving efforts. There are five levels of involvement:

- Inform –** provide the public with balanced and objective information to help them understand the issue and/or solution; transparent communication ensures residents understand why and how a project or initiative is being undertaken
- Consult –** obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions presented by Council and/or Administration; the public has opportunities to present their opinions and can sometimes provide feedback and direction on specific choices.
- Involve –** work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered by Council and/or Administration; residents provide input, opinions and suggestions, which are taken into consideration in the final decision.
- Collaborate –** partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution; the public has a hands-on role in determining the final direction of a project or initiative.
- Empower –** placing final decision-making in the hands of the public

**2. Why is the Town undertaking this project?**

The Public Participation Strategy will help the Town of Okotoks develop a consistent approach and toolkit to ensure an effective and meaningful relationship with residents. The project will draw on best practices in local government and community engagement and extensive local input to guide how the Town develops, implements and evaluates its public participation activities. Together with engagement consultant, MODUS, the Town is gathering feedback from a variety of perspectives (including residents, staff, Council and committees) to help create this strategy and toolkit.

**3. What kind of information is the Town wanting from residents?**

The Town wants residents to share what methods of communication and involvement would be most effective in keeping them informed and increasing their participation in decisions and conversations about Town initiatives.

**4. What are elements of meaningful public participation?**

- Information provided is timely, complete, and accessible to the public
- A reasonable timeline for participation (i.e. early involvement to avoid the notion that a decision is already made)
- Ensuring that the appropriate level of engagement is undertaken for the project
- Those who are affected by the issue or initiative are able to participate
- Increased awareness of and sensitivity to community values
- The process is adaptive to the needs of participants
- Results are transparent and communicated in a timely manner

**5. Why does the Town need to develop a strategy? Doesn't the Town already do public participation?**

Creating open and transparent relationships with the community has always been a priority for the Town. We are keen to improve and expand opportunities for residents and taxpayers to have greater involvement in municipal matters and decisions that affect them. It's important that the Town have consistent practices in place for residents to learn more and get involved in Town programs and services.

**6. Why is public participation important?**

Public involvement in municipal decision-making makes decisions better. It improves both the quality and quantity of information available to Council and Administration when considering long-term investments, priorities and budget allocations. It is especially important when high-impact issues or projects are being considered as the public has opportunity to share their views prior to a decision being made, and can see how their input was considered in the decision.

## **7. What are the benefits of public participation?**

Engaging the public provides numerous benefits, including:

- Greater understanding of municipal government and value for tax dollars
- Better informed, higher quality and more sustainable decisions
- Greater support and public acceptance
- Better-informed residents, Council members, and Town staff
- Focusing attention on important issues
- Obtaining valuable information about the public environment and potential impacts
- Creating a positive foundation for working with interested parties, which helps to build trust, resolve problems, make informed decisions and reach common goals
- Increasing communication, transparency and accountability to the public
- Aligning the project design with public priorities and expectations before significant resources have been invested in detailed project planning
- Increasing the credibility of decisions and decision-makers

## **8. What is the approach the Town and MODUS are taking in this project?**

Engagement specialists, MODUS Planning Design and Engagement, have developed a three-phase process to create the strategy and toolkit:

Phase 1: compiling research from previous public participation activities the Town has undertaken, reviewing best practices from other municipalities, and raising awareness about the project

Phase 2: gathering information from the public, through a survey, stakeholder meetings and a “storefront Open House.” MODUS is also reviewing the mandates of Council’s committees and advisory boards to understand how these groups provide input into Council decisions.

Phase 3: Create the strategy and toolkit and introduce it in a current Town participation project (likely the development of a Culture and Heritage Master Plan). The strategy and toolkit will be revised to ensure the Town is using the most effective practices to engage residents.

## **9. When will it be completed?**

May - December 2017.

## **10. What is the anticipated outcome of this project?**

This project will give us the tools and methods to foster better and deeper conversations with our residents. By ensuring consistent two-way communication with the public, Council can be confident that decisions reached will reflect residents’ priorities and interests. It will also help Administration provide higher service levels that better meet resident needs.

## **11. How can I get involved?**

More information on input opportunities including a short survey and a “street-front open house” will be available soon at:

## 12. Contact Info:

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# OKOTOKS PUBLIC PARTICIPATION STRATEGY

