Public Participation Plan

Updated July 2018

1. Introduction _____

At the June 2013 strategic planning session, Council discussion was held regarding a formal communications plan with the focus of utilizing various mediums. A Communications Strategy was adopted with a general focus of enhancing the current communication processes, both internally and externally. Various communications means were identified, including social media and what our current technical capabilities held for our organization.

In 2018, the Municipal Government Act legislated that every Alberta municipality requires a public participation policy.

The Public Participation Plan is intended to define different levels of engagement, as well as providing overall communications processes, standards and priorities.

2. Communications Guidelines _____

Responsibility
The primary goal of communications is to create and maintain a positive public image of Kneehill County and to ensure that employees and residents are well-informed of our policies, programs and services.

Public participation is essential to the municipal decision process. Kneehill County is committed to open and accountable decision making, which includes appropriate levels of communication and consultation between Council and the public. Communicating with residents is a key function of the County, involving officials and employees at all levels.

3. Principles of Public Participation _____

1. Citizen consultation is recognized as an asset, is valued and encouraged.
2. Builds mutual trust and accountability with the public.
3. Proactive communications will enhance resident satisfaction.
4. We will utilize a variety of communications tools to reach various audiences.
5. We will strive to keep the public informed.
6. Everyone potentially affected by the consultation process has an opportunity to become involved.
7. The public clearly understands its role in the process.
8. The consultation process is respectful, effective and transparent.
9. Communication is clear, timely and effective.
10. Participants are informed of outcomes of community consultation.

4. Defining Levels of Public Participation _____

* Excerpt from IAP2 Federation Spectrum of Public Participation

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public Participation Goal	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decision.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public issues and concerns are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place the final decision making in the hands of the public.
Promise to the Public	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and issues are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendation into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.
Example Tools	- Fact sheets - Websites - Open houses	- Public comment - Focus groups - Surveys - Public meetings	- Workshops - Deliberate polling	- Advisory Committees - Participatory decision making	- Ballots - Plebiscites - Delegated decisions

Increasing municipal ownership of the decision making process and end decision

5. Continuum of Community Engagement _____

Engagement occurs along a continuum with different desired outcomes at each degree. This continuum represents degrees of public involvement; it is not a process map. An engagement process may include one or all of the levels of engagement in any order, depending on project context and desired outcomes.

	Information Sharing *Directive Decisions*	Consultation *Consultative Decisions*	Active Participation *Collaborative Decisions*
Goal	To educate and inform citizens	To seek feedback, test ideas, develop concepts and collaborative solutions.	To share or delegate decision making.
Relationship	One Way	Two way	Dynamic
Tools	Newsletter, Annual Reports, Public Announcements.	Resident Meetings, Public Advisory Committees, Public Hearings.	Community visioning, Community or Regional Agreements/Initiatives, Facility Agreements.
When	Are made by a person authorized to do so, and are issued to others simply to inform them the decision was made.	Often involve moral or emotional elements.	When municipalities are in partnership with communities, organizations or individuals to deliver services or to respond to long-term challenges.
Examples of When to Use	• There is an urgent need to respond immediately • A person in authority is acting within their authority • The decision is routine and accepted as part of the municipalities operations (ie: snow removal) • The decision is dictated by law (ie: improvement to water systems)	• Public notification and input are required by law (as per MGA requirements or other legislative) • The decision is a known concern of other parties or is likely to have a significant impact on other parties (ie: a proposed development) • The decision affects society's moral or emotional expectations (ie: expansion of recreation facility) • The decision affects the lifestyle of citizens (ie: road closure) • Council/administration requests public input prior to making the decision (ie: public buildings or park space)	• Development (ie: subdivision planning, recreation facility development) • Inter-Municipal Agreements • Industrial Zoning When a municipality embarks on a collaborative decision process, Council must recognize that parties who share in the investment expect to share in the decision. There must be assurances these partners will be heard and their wishes respected. However, Council has the final decision, in good faith, on behalf of the municipality.

As we move left to right, the level of influence to decision making increases, as well as time for the engagement process.

6. Implementation Guidelines _____

The implementation process described below is a guideline to planning and implementation of an effective public engagement processes.

6.1 Needs Identification

There are a number of considerations, both County and public-based, that should be discussed in determining whether public engagement is required.

County-based Considerations
- **Legal or regulatory requirements:** there is a legal requirement for public engagement according to the Municipal Government Act (MGA) or under federal or provincial law or the requirements of regulatory bodies.
- **Internal directives:** public engagement is required on the basis of internal authorized decisions, including County policies.
- **Administration or Council requests:** Public engagement is requested by County administration or Council.

Public-based Considerations
- **Collaborative situation**: The public will share in the decision process
- **Impact on the public:** The decision or outcome will have a significant impact on the public's social, economic, and/or environmental situation.
- **Public requests:** County citizens or stakeholders request that public engagement be conducted.

When Should Council & Staff Include Communications in A Project/Initiative

Communications Need	Impact to County Operations	Public Concern, Support	Financial Impacts	Potential for Media Coverage	Public Safety Risks	Impacts to Reputation
No support needed	Some service interruptions/ service enhancement possible	No public concern or support	No financial impacts	No coverage	No public safety hazards	No impacts to reputation of municipality
Brief Communications, communications to monitor	Service interruptions	Possible concern or support	Possible impacts to budget but not to taxpayers	Local coverage	Some public safety risks possible	Possible risk or opportunity of positive impact to rep
Communications plan required, communications to monitor	Inability to provide service for a day or more. New service offering probable	Probable concern or support	Probable impacts to property taxes (Including savings/tax reduction)	Provincial coverage	Public safety risks probably	Positive or negative impact among key stakeholder groups likely
Communications plan and active ongoing support	Some service interruptions. Service enhancement plans	Significant public concern or support	Significant impact to property taxes	National coverage	Risk of fatality	Broad negative or positive impact among various audiences

6.2 Planning

Much of planning for effective public participation process involves anticipating issues and responses the public will have and identifying how best to work with those in an open and transparent manner.

The process presented here identifies the various aspects of a public consultation process and presents them in a logical order. In moving through the planning process, there may be a need to go back to earlier steps and make modifications.

Planning Steps	Description
1. Identify and agree upon the issue(s) being addressed	• Establishing the scope of the public participation process by considering what issues, topics, or aspects of the project the public may actually influence • Clearly identify what is and is not on the table for public input with explanations for each, building transparency and trust while managing expectations.
2. Establish clear objectives and outcomes for the public participation:	• Is the public participation working towards building knowledge, solving a problem, sharing ideas, evaluating and prioritizing, or other desired outcomes? • Consider the likely levels of conflict and whether or not the process should seek to produce agreement as opposed to bringing the issues into the open. • In establishing objectives and outcomes, consider both what the County and the public might wish to achieve through public consultation; they may be different. • Some public consultation outcomes may be measurable; however, many are not.
3. Initial stakeholder identification:	• Whose support is needed and why? (ensure the stakeholders know what is needed from them, define expectations) • Is opposition expected? (if so, communicate with them even though you may never win them over) • What are the external factors, public perceptions, commonly held beliefs, historical influences, and related issues that may be raised as the public consultation process is implemented?
4. Establish the desired level of public participation:	• Select the degree of public participation most suited to the issue and desired outcomes. • What degree of involvement is the County willing or able to implement? County-based considerations may dictate what level of consultation is appropriate.
5. Identify tools and strategies best suited to the situation:	• Specific tools and strategies are well suited to different levels of engagement, others to specific demographics and populations.
6. Project costs of public participation:	• Financial cost & staff resources. Postage, room rentals, display boards, etc. all have a dollar amount attached. Consider the time it takes to develop the public participation plan as well as implementing it.

7. Location and Timing:	• Wherever possible, hold public participation events in the communities that may be impacted by the outcomes.
	• For processes that impact the entire County, consider hosting several smaller events in the different communities.
	• These timelines are recommended for public participation:
	   • General information: As soon as reasonable
	   • Background info: 2-4 weeks before events
	   • Activity/Event notification: 3-4 weeks before events
	   • Reminders: 1 week before events
	   • Follow-up communications: as soon as is reasonable

8. Clear Communication:	• It has been recognized that there is a need to provide services in language that is clear and understandable. • Design the communication from the context and perspective of the reader, rather than the knowledge and expectations of the sender.

6.3 Choosing & Implementing the Best Approach

Council and staff will strive to choose the best approach for public participation for situations proactively. As elected representatives of citizens, councillors have a further obligation to be aware of citizen expectations and concerns before making their decisions.

Twelve questions to ask before you notify citizens

Ideally, the planning begins with internal discussions. If a public consultation process is expected to be implemented, a plan is needed. Here are questions that need to be answered:
1. What potential decision is being considered?
2. What are its implications?
3. Who should we be notifying?
4. What input do we require?
5. How are we intending to gather the input?
6. How will we analyze what we hear?
7. What resources do we have available?
8. What are our timelines?
9. Is this likely to be controversial? If so, how should we manage the controversy?
10. How will the input be used in the decision?
11. What will success look like?
12. What outcomes do we seek from our efforts to involve the public?

* Reference Pg 2-1 of the Public Input Toolkit for Municipalities

6.3.1 Choosing a Types of Meeting:

Type of Meeting	Advantages	Disadvantages
Storefront or "over-the-counter" Meeting: allows anyone to drop in and discuss plans over the counter	• Citizens can choose time to drop in • Citizen gets one-on-one time with municipal representatives • Great if a small number of citizens have a high interest	• Input is often verbal and doesn't always get recorded • Relatively time-consuming • Cannot accommodate large numbers
Open House Meetings: an opportunity for people to drop in, review information, talk to a municipal representative, and submit their preferences	• Allows many people to review information and talk to representatives • Display information to interested citizens (visual boards, on-table materials, take home materials) • Convenient time for a variety of stakeholders, spending as much time as they wish there • Staff should be "interviewing" stakeholders • Opportunity for ideas exchange, written responses • Non-confrontational format	• Will not result in any definitive input unless designed to do so • Does not promote interaction or consensus building
Tip: Staff can "interview" the stakeholders for information exchange		
Ratepayer/Public Meetings: larger meetings with formal agenda and formal presentations	• Council will present to lots of stakeholders at the same time • Everyone gets to hear what everyone else has to say • Explain the process to stakeholders upfront • Notes to be taken by staff • Avoid long presentations by municipal representatives • Incorporate response forms	• May become confrontational • "Showboating" at the microphone is a problem
Tips: Don't set up a microphone (have roaming staff with mics), use a facilitator, use tables/chairs instead of rows, have representatives well informed with information readily available to all.		

Workshops: participants can "roll up their sleeves" and work together to assess information and create recommendations.	• Focused on specific topic • Promotes group problem solving and exchange of ideas • Can lead to creative recommendations	• Longer meetings requiring a greater commitment from participants • Extensive preparation • Must be well facilitated
Tip: Making this an invitational event may increase the amount of attendees due to time commitment.		
Online Discussions or Scheduled Online Chats: allows anyone to ask about the plans and talk to an expert (via Skype, Google Chat, AIM, Facebook Chat, Message Boards, etc)	• Online spaces where people can read information, comment on others ideas and add their own opinion. • Stakeholders can choose drop in time • Stakeholders who cannot drop in during business hours or reach the location can still participate • Staff members can converse with multiple residents at once • A chance to have experts make comments • Depending on how its set up, comments can be public or not visible to everyone	• Harder to guarantee that participants are residents of the area in question • Needs terms of reference if everyone's comments are public in case abusive comments need to be removed.
Focus Groups: An opportunity to provide some detailed information to a small group to see what options they prefer and why.	• Invitation only • Small cross-section of people to pull from to get the full range of opinions of stakeholders • Participants are shown a series of ideas and ask for their response. • Used to "test" ideas, not to "sell" ideas.	• Members of the group may not be accepted by the public as good enough cross-section • Takes time commitment from participants
Round Table Meetings: 15-25 people invited to sit around the table and provide their perceptions, concerns and preferences	• Usually invitational • Intention is to encourage sharing of ideas among communities that have different needs or perspectives • Short presentations are used to provide information then the participants are asked to provide their views and ideas. • Flip charts are useful to allow participants to see what is recorded	• Limited number of participants at the sessions • Must be well facilitated and recorded • Can be perceived as a technique to "divide and conquer"
Advisory Committee: Similar to round table, except the committee meets several times.	• Allows time for members to get to know one another and "do their homework" • Builds consensus about detailed recommendations • Agendas, Minutes, follow up actions and reports	• A secretary is required to take minutes, follow up action charts, reports
Webinar: for presentation style meetings (via Skype, LiveMeeting, GoToMeeting, etc)	• People can attend from anywhere • Easy to record and post online for people who missed the event	• Technical difficulties often arise, especially with video and sound

6.3.2 Choosing A Format for Sharing Information

Format	Advantages	Disadvantages
Website	• Many people go online first for information • Provides up to date information • Can include links to a wide range of information • Allows participants to choose how much to review • Can be linked to an electronic response format	• Website must be kept up to date • Participation information can be easily lost in the amount of municipal information • Not everyone can access information on the web
Brochure	• Concise and graphic description of information • Provides a standard reference for participants	• Often difficult to get into the hands of the participants • Expensive to publish • Requires time to write and publish
Display Boards	• Concise and graphic description of information • Provides a standard reference for participants • Can be produced on a moderate notice	• Only available to those who attend display locations • Can be costly, damaged easily • Can require personal to set up and explain
PowerPoint SlideShow	• Concise and graphic • Provides information in short amount of time • Good support for live presentations • Use of graphics enhances learning • Can be presented and shared online as a webinar	• Rarely a stand alone format (needs presenter) • Format tends to be lists, not context • Must print and hand out in order to be a reference piece.
Newsletter	• Relatively inexpensive • Provide information overview • Can be distributed with other materials, including surveys	• Can be mistaken for junk mail • Not durable • Will not be read if too wordy • Email list may be a challenge to form
Facebook/Other Social Media	• Provides up to date information and directs traffic to the website • Easy for people to share with people they know • Easy way to ask questions or conduct a poll	• More challenging to share documents • Not accessible to everyone, need a FB account to access • Requires "supervision" of comments (Terms of Reference)
YouTube or Similar-use Page	• Share information in a fun and engaging way • Can get the employees involved • Can embed into municipal website	• Can be time consuming • Resources, development of multimedia required

6.3.3 Choosing A Technique for Distributing Information

Technique	Advantages	Disadvantages
Person to Person: face to face, telephone, email or text to individual	• Most effective approach • Allows respondent to ask questions and get involved immediately • Highly recommended if you need to invite a relatively small number of individuals	• Time consuming • Limits number of contacts • Lack of recording
Leadership Networks: Contacting known community leaders and giving them the information	• Can be very effective, but depends on the skill of the leaders contacted and time available	• May be seen as favouring certain parties • Tendency to attract the same people to meetings repeatedly • No control over how or when leaders will distribute information
Direct Correspondence: Letter, bulk email, fax, e-newsletter, text message to group	• Relatively effective • Targeted to those who require notification	• Requires up to date mailing list • May be expensive for large distribution
Presentations at regularly scheduled meetings	• Provides on-site presentation at meeting organized by a target group or association • Very convenient for group members • Promotes early involvement and learning • Promotes networking	• May delay process, waiting on group to schedule • May be seen as favouring organizations • Requires significant commitment of time (evenings or weekends)
Bulk Mail	• Covers a large area with relatively high assurance that each household and business are informed	• Likely to be confused with junk mail, discarded
News Release Press release to traditional media or online media	• Can create interest and attention if picked up by the media • Can provide background information that may stimulate interest • Can point stakeholders to website	• No control over when and where media will show the story • The story may include misinformation from other sources
Displays, Signs, Bulletins	• Stimulates interest if placed correctly • Format requires simplicity	• Depends on location • Relatively expensive
Public Notice in Media	• May be required by MGA • Some review public notices regularly	• Relatively small impact on people who get involved
Social Media presence	• Meets residents where they are comfortable online • Easy to share, timely information	• Online community requires information to be timely • No guarantee participants are in your jurisdiction

7. Follow Through and Evaluation _____

Ineffective follow through and reporting lead to public dissatisfaction with the immediate process and decrease the willingness of participants to engage in future processes.

- Effective reporting to the public should include:
  - what decisions were made
  - why those decisions were made
  - connect the decision with the input
  - be prepared to explain why some ideas could not be supported by Council

- Inventory any notes, responses, comments and have a written report on file of these.

- Wherever possible, the follow-up reporting should be released through similar channels used throughout the process.

- Remember to thank participants. In most instances, a verbal thank-you when the participation occurs is sufficient, but is a must.

Once **ANY LEVEL** of public consultation process is complete, evaluate and document the following:
- main issues
- objectives and desired outcomes and whether they were met
- process successes and the challenges
  - techniques used
  - the venue, time and location
  - satisfaction levels with both the process and the outcomes
- unexpected outcomes
- costs and resources required

The evaluations should be circulated to appropriate staff members and kept for future reference.