

Municipality of Lakeshore – Report to Council

Strategic & Legal Affairs

Civic Affairs



To: Mayor & Members of Council
From: Alex Denonville, Team Leader – Civic Engagement
Date: July 5, 2022
Subject: Communications and Engagement Master Plan

Recommendation

Adopt the Communications & Engagement Master Plan as presented at the July 12, 2022 Council Meeting.

Background

This report and attached Communications & Engagement Master Plan present a road map to improve Lakeshore’s communications and citizen engagement efforts.

This report will first provide a summary of some of the broader changes and challenges that local governments are facing in terms of communications and engagement, then describe Lakeshore’s current position within that context, including an analysis of our strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats.

From there, the report will outline the Communications & Engagement Master Plan and highlight strategic priorities and some key initiatives.

Changes and Challenges

The communication and citizen engagement landscape has experienced a significant shift over the last three decades, particularly in terms of citizen expectations and the rise of new technology.

While public sector organizations continue to prioritize operational efficiencies and business-like approaches to governance, there has been a growing expectation for citizens to be more effectively involved in decision-making.

There is a growing recognition that public sector organizations should “focus on creating opportunities for citizenship by forging trusting relationships with members of the public and working with them to define public problems, develop alternatives, and implement

solutions” (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015). As part of this shift, the work of public servants is to more deeply engage citizens, not just as “customers” on a transactional basis, but as active participants in governance.

Approaches to citizen engagement themselves have evolved to recognize the need for public sector organizations to identify when and how to engage citizens in increasingly complex and technical decision-making processes.¹ As the approaches have evolved, so too has technology that can facilitate communication and engagement between local governments and their citizens. Advances in electronic communication methods, such as email, Internet, mobile applications, and SMS-based messaging, have provided a slew of new options to “spread the word” in quick and efficient ways.

Likewise, the rise of social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter expanded options for users to create their own content and interact directly with public sector institutions. While the monumental shift from one-way to two-way communication platforms created new opportunities for citizen engagement and communications, it has not been free of challenges.

While the boom of social media and electronic communication has greatly increased the speed at which information can be created and distributed, there are persistent inequalities in terms of citizens’ ability to access those platforms. The COVID-19 pandemic, for instance, highlighted the “digital divide” between urban and rural areas, with rural residents far less likely to have access to affordable broadband Internet (Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, n.d.). Similarly, a 2021 study from Statistics Canada demonstrated how age, education, employment status, and household income may predict access to, and levels of, Internet use (Statistics Canada, 2021).²

Beyond access to technology, research has also shown how other resources, such as time, money, and “civic skills,” can affect a citizen’s ability to participate in engagement opportunities. These resources are not equally distributed in communities, with some groups of individuals having more of the resources needed to participate fully in decision-making and engagement initiatives (Brady, Verba, & Lehman Schloz, 1995).

Similarly, the pervasiveness of new communication technology may also influence citizens’ expectations of their public sector organizations. For example, seamless online user experiences with 24/7 customer service support (both common in the private sector), represent areas where citizen expectations may not be satisfied by public organizations with limited staffing and resources.

¹ In the late 1960s for instance, Sherry Arnstein’s seminal work on the “Ladder of Citizen Participation” served up a dramatic critique of citizen engagement practices by local governments in the United States (Arnstein, 1969). In the early 2000s, Archon Fung’s work on the “Democracy Cube” added new dimensions to the conversation with considerations of the complexities of governance, communication modes, and degrees of authority and power (Fung, 2006).

² Lakeshore’s 2020 Community Survey noted a significant preference for non-electronic methods of communication vs digital forms (eg. 53% preferred mailed communications).

Comments

Matching organizational service levels with the expectations of citizens continues to be a challenge for local governments, and the proposed Communication and Engagement Master Plan takes specific aim at building organizational capacity to effectively communicate to, and engage, Lakeshore's citizens.

While several of its goals and action items may be accomplished within Lakeshore's current resources, many initiatives will require new funding or staffing (such as the positions identified in the 2020 Organizational Review).

Requests for the resources required to implement the Master Plan are expected to be presented for future budget deliberations. This approach is consistent with Council's Strategic Plan Item #5.2 to "Enhance internal and external communications," which noted the need to discuss service level expectations.

Overall, however, the "answer" to improving communication and engagement will not lie solely with new technology, staffing, or budgetary resources. Success calls for a comprehensive, corporate-wide approach, guided by policies and processes, and delivered by the staff and leaders of the Municipality of Lakeshore, including the Mayor and members of Council³.

With those changes and challenges in mind, the next section will describe Lakeshore's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats which informed the creation of this plan.

SWOT Analysis

Strengths

- New investments in technology and staffing with additional technology resources to facilitate engagement.
- Knowledgeable staff with a wide range of expertise.
- Council members with strong ties to citizens and community groups.

Weaknesses

- Lakeshore's large geographic area presents additional barriers to engagement, particularly for rural residents.
- Unequal access to broadband/high-quality Internet.
- Limited staffing and resources dedicated to supporting communications and engagement throughout the organization.

³ Section 226.1(b) of the Municipal Act, 2001, notes that the head of council, as chief executive officer, has a duty to "promote public involvement in the municipality's activities."

Opportunities

- Robust network of engaged and active citizens and community groups.
- Ongoing reorganization may facilitate interdepartmental collaboration.
- Lakeshore's community facilities offer place-based opportunities to engage citizens and convey information.
- New community media outlet launched.

Threats

- Continued trend of growing distrust between citizens and public sector organizations globally.
- Ongoing diminishment of local news media capacity.
- Organizational resistance to change and lack of buy-in from staff (particularly leadership).
- Continuation of a siloed approach to departmental operations.
- Ongoing impact of COVID-19 community organizations, interpersonal connections with Lakeshore staff have eroded.

Communications and Engagement Master Plan Summary

Guiding Principles

The following **guiding principles** have informed the priorities and initiatives identified in this plan:

- Honesty & Transparency
- Trust & Respect
- Equitable & Inclusive
- Continuous Improvement

The Spectrum of Communications and Engagement

The following spectrum of communications and engagement is adapted from the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2). As an adaptation, the spectrum adds another one-way method, "Convince," to capture the intent of communication-only initiatives.

It is important to note that given the wide range of Lakeshore's operations, from road maintenance to recreation programs, there is no "cookie-cutter" template for communication and engagement initiatives. Instead, the unique characteristics of each project will be considered, with this spectrum serving as a guide for staff, Council, and citizens.

- Inform
 - Communicating to assist citizens in understanding Lakeshore's operations and governance.
- Convince
 - Communicating to change behaviour or call citizens to action.
- Consult
 - Listening to and learning about citizens' views, ideas, concerns, and expectations.
- Collaborate
 - Working with citizens and stakeholders to create projects from the ground up while identifying and incorporating feedback as much as possible.
- Empower
 - Partnering with citizens and giving them direct authority to make decisions.

Strategic Priorities & Key Initiatives

The following list outlines the Master Plan's four strategic priorities and provides a selection of objectives and action items. The attached Plan includes the full list of objectives and action items.

1. Improve the citizen engagement experience and build civic literacy throughout Lakeshore
 - Amend and create new policies and procedures (e.g. Citizen Engagement & Notice Policy, Communications & Engagement Procedure & Planning Toolkit).
 - Identify and mitigate barriers to communications and engagement.
 - Seek opportunities to improve citizen experience and civic literacy (eg. participatory budgeting, partnerships with schools).
2. Build Lakeshore's communications & engagement capacity and foster a citizen-centric culture.
 - Create a Communications, Engagement, & Public Service Synergy Team.
 - Enhance the quality of data production and visualization to assist Council and administration in decision-making⁴.
 - Provide training and best practice documents related to communications and engagement.
 - Expand and standardize print marketing distribution.

⁴ This item expands upon Council's Strategic Plan Item 5.1: undertake a statistically accurate Community Survey on quality of life and service level expectations.

- Enhance corporate website feedback tools and analyze digital metrics to improve the Municipality's online presence.
3. Engage community organizations and celebrate active citizenship & community service.
 - Launch programs to acknowledge the contributions of community organizations and citizens in the community.
 - Identify opportunities to leverage strategic partnerships with community groups and local stakeholders to expand Lakeshore's communications reach.
 4. Build relationships with local First Nations and Indigenous groups and implement an Indigenous Engagement and Education program.
 - Create a First Nations and Indigenous Peoples Consultation Framework & Policy.
 - Host an annual community dinner with Lakeshore Council and local First Nations, as well as Indigenous and Métis community groups and organizations.
 - Launch an Indigenous Engagement & Education program for staff and Council.
 - Seek additional opportunities to advance Truth and Reconciliation in Lakeshore and beyond.

The Limitations of Engagement

Finally, it is also important to note some limitations to communications and engagement, which would be considered part of the "Honesty & Transparency" guiding principle.

For instance, governance (including legislative and policy) decision-making resides with Council, as outlined in the *Municipal Act, 2001*. The plan does not intend to delegate that authority. Similarly, engaging citizens and the public does not mean that all feedback will be acted upon or carried out.

Financial Impacts

The adoption of the Communications and Engagement Master Plan will have no immediate financial impact. Requests for new resources required to fully implement the Plan will be presented for future budget deliberations.

An implementation plan will also be presented for Council's consideration at a future meeting.

Attachments

Attachment 1 - Communications & Engagement Master Plan (PDF)

References

- Arnstein, S. R. (1969). A Ladder of Citizen Participation. *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35(4), 216-224.
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- Statistics Canada. (2021, November 9). *Internet-use Typology of Canadians: Online Activities and Digital Skills*. Retrieved from Analytical Studies Branch Research Paper Series: <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/11f0019m/11f0019m2021008-eng.htm>

Report Approval Details

Document Title:	Communications and Engagement Master Plan.docx
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This report and all of its attachments were approved and signed as outlined below:

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