



MANAGEMENT REPORT

Date: December 3, 2024
To: Finance and Labour Relations Committee
From: Karmen Krueger, CPA, CA, Director of Corporate Services/Treasurer
Report Number: FIN24-036
Attachments: 1) Engage Stratford Survey Report and Paper Surveys;
2) Pop-Up Events Photos

Title: Summary of Public Engagement Initiatives and Outcomes for Budget 2025

Objective: To provide the Finance and Labour Relations Committee and Council with summarized results from the 2025 Budget Engagement activities.

Background: On October 28, 2024, a survey consisting of fourteen questions was issued to seek resident feedback and sensitivities around the upcoming budget. The intent was to gauge participation and get a sense of overall tone and reception relating to the process and overall satisfaction or dissatisfaction with City services. Specific initiatives were not targeted; however, respondents had the opportunity to provide general or specific comments on the City services and any items within the budget package.

The survey was open for about 3½ weeks until end of day, Tuesday, November 19, 2024, allowing this period for residents to get involved and provide their feedback.

Similarly to 2023 and 2024, the 2025 draft budget survey was launched on the Engage Stratford public engagement site. In addition to providing the electronic methods, staff provided paper surveys to several locations around the City, including the Local Community Food Centre, the Stratford Public Library, and the Rotary Complex.

Based on responses to feedback received in 2023 and 2024, there were more open-ended questions and in addition to the survey, staff also created a couple of other opportunities for residents to get engaged as outlined below.

Analysis:

Survey

The Engage Stratford platform recorded 136 survey responses plus nine received on paper. One additional email was received with a specific comment. (2024: 98). While 146 responses is a reasonable response rate, this number compared to the number of residents in the City may not be representative of all voices.

The survey tool provides a summary document attached to this report for review. Comments received by email or paper, outside of the platform are included in the report analysis below.

All responses are unedited, except for redacting profanity, inappropriate comments towards specific individuals, and removal of personal information provided.

Not surprisingly, increasing property taxes was the least preferred method to balance the City's cost pressures. The most selected responses included increasing user fees, introducing new user fees, and reducing service levels, which indicates that residents recognize that managing rising costs is not a single solution.

Forty-five percent would support a tax increase to maintain or enhance levels of service, while 55% of respondents indicated a preference to keep taxes at current levels even if it means cutting services.

Summarizing qualitative comments is a bit more challenging as they vary widely, however of the 146 survey respondents, approximately 80 had suggestions to enhance investments in some services, with road maintenance topping the list, followed by improved transit, housing and homelessness initiatives, and family services (social services and recreational services, including the pool).

When asked which areas residents felt the City should reduce services, there were a similar number of suggestions, including reducing investments in protective services, transit (noting that these comments offset those provided under suggestions for enhancements) and parks and flowers.

Some comments demonstrated that the City could do a better job of contextualizing specific service areas. As an example, comments that indicated a suggestion to reduce spending in areas like the airport or horticulture, or even around staffing levels did not have context of what those really represent proportionally overall or how they relate to the level of service provided. The comments are valid and should be considered, but these suggestions would result only in small fractional impacts to the City's multi-million-dollar operation if implemented.

Staff continually work to provide as much supporting information as possible for the draft budget documents, however there are areas that we can continue to build upon,

including how we categorize and structure our budget, and explaining why the City does or does not provide certain services. By continuing to enhance the supporting documents and improving communication, misinformation can be addressed.

Open House – City Hall Auditorium

The open house was held on Monday, November 18 from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. All departments were in attendance along with various members of Council. Over the course of the evening four members of the public and two media persons attended the event. One response was received on the interactive activities noting library resources should be a priority. This format for future budgets will be re-evaluated given the low turnout compared to the time and resource commitments needed to hold these types of opportunities as we continue to try and find opportunities for public engagement and education.

New this year was the introduction of pop-ups, where information regarding the budget process and upcoming ways to get involved was provided to residents.

Pop-up Budget Priority Summary

At each of the engagement events, a board listing several financial priorities was provided and residents were encouraged to put a sticker under the items they felt should be a priority for 2025. The results were as follows:

Priorities	Open House	Farmers Market	The Local	Total
Housing/Homelessness	0	33	20	53
Library Resources	1	15	5	20
Climate Change	0	16	5	21
Road Maintenance	0	23	6	29
Saving for the Future	0	3	4	7
Transit	0	5	11	16
Location Total	1	95	51	

If visitors had alternative suggestions or ideas not captured in the options, they were encouraged to put their idea on a post-it note and themes from these are summarized below.

Pop-up – Farmer’s Market

A pop-up was held at the Farmer’s Market on Saturday, November 23. Approximately 75 people spoke with the Director of Corporate Services and Councillor Hunter, who attended for part of the morning, and/or participated in the interactive activities. The responses focused on infrastructure repairs and updates including the following:

- Repair of roads including:
 - Douglas Street
 - McCarthy between Romeo and Mornington

- Quinlan Road
- Crosswalks
 - Downie Street (in the downtown core)
 - Ontario/Huron/York Streets
- 4-way stop at Lorne Avenue and O'Loane Avenue
- Stop lights at Ontario Street and Canadian Tire

Additionally, suggestions such as free garbage pickup, outdoor skating rinks, investment in IT and no increase to taxes were noted.

Pop-up – The Local

A pop-up was held at The Local on Monday, November 25. Approximately 50 people spoke with staff and/or participated in the interactive activities. The responses focused on attainable/affordable housing and public services including the following:

- Transit
 - Free transit
 - Smaller buses
 - Funding to transit
 - Increased weekend service
 - Heated bus shelters
 - Increase of washroom hours for transit
- Waste Reduction
 - Free garbage
 - Weekly garbage and recycling pickup
 - Two free bags of garbage per household per week
- Access to Services
 - Creation of safe, inclusive spaces
 - Greater access to mental health services
 - Displays of public services in public locations
 - Greater access to daycare and before/after school care
 - Men's shelter
 - Local public housing benefit

Staff appreciate the residents who took the time to complete the survey and provide thoughtful and constructive feedback. We hope to continue to build upon the survey questions and pop-up format and locations going forward to gain more and better insights.

The Engage Stratford platform appears to be more effective compared to other traditional methods to disseminate the survey. This is supported by responses noted for Question 2, where completing surveys appears to be the preferred method of providing the City feedback. However, the response from residents at the pop-ups was very encouraging and allowed opportunities to hear from other residents who might not complete online surveys or come to Open Houses at City Hall.

Financial Implications:

Not applicable:

There are no financial implications because of this report.

Alignment with Strategic Priorities:

Intentionally Change to Support the Future

This report aligns with this priority as increasing engagement with residents is intended to inform Council decision-making.

Alignment with One Planet Principles:

Not applicable: This report does not specifically align with One Planet Principles.

Staff Recommendation: THAT the report titled, "Summary of Public Engagement Initiatives and Outcomes for Budget 2025" (FIN24-036) dated December 3, 2024, be received for information.

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