

Communications update for infrastructure, land use changes and related projects**Report Purpose**

To present Planning and Development Services and Transportation and Engineering Operations current approach to communications for infrastructure, land use changes and related projects and seek Council approval for proposed recommended improvements.

Recommendation

THAT the communication improvements identified in the December 5, 2023, Planning and Development Services and Transportation and Engineering Options report be approved, with funding from current operational budgets.

Our Strategic Goals

Goal 4 - Municipal Excellence

Governance Requirement

Goal 4 Priority - Optimal use of resources that meets the community's needs

Report***Planning and Development Services – land use***

The development of land is ultimately achieved through a hierarchy of approvals. Each approval builds on the last and provides further detail.

Each stage in the planning process includes some form of communication with the public. As the development process gets more detailed, communication evolves from soliciting input at the statutory plan preparation stage (Municipal Development Plan (MDP), Area Concept Plans (ACP), Area Structure Plans (ASP), Area Redevelopment Plans (ARP)) to informing residents at implementation of approved plans (rezoning, subdivision, development permits). The area of notification also changes as the planning process moves to the more detailed level and implementation stages. The responsibility for plan preparation also transfers from County initiated to landowner initiated as the process becomes more site specific.

The following is a summary of the County's current practice of communication during each step of the planning process.

Statutory planning

When a statutory plan is being proposed or amended, the County is looking to receive input that will help inform the plan. The County's Statutory Plan Terms of Reference (TOR) guides the preparation of statutory plans or amendments and includes specific public engagement requirements with the intent of gathering feedback on the proposal. The manner of public engagement required in the TOR can vary depending on the scale and intent of the plan or amendment.

In the case of a MDP, ACP or ARP, given the area of land encompassed, there are often many landowners within the plan area and the project is most often led by County administration. The form and extent of communication for these plans is tailored to each project and is discussed with Council at its commencement.

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ASPs and amendments to them are most often proposed by the landowner/developer that owns the land subject of the ASP or amendment. The TOR guides developers on specific public engagement expectations.

All statutory plans and statutory plan amendments require a public hearing prior to Council making the decision. Currently, notification of a public hearing is required to be advertised in two consecutive issues of the local newspaper and letters mailed to surrounding landowners. In addition to the legislative requirements, notice of public hearings is also posted on the County website and attendees at public meetings are also informed that a public hearing will eventually be held.

Implementation

As the type of land use for an area has been previously established in statutory plans, at the time of application for a rezoning to a standard district a notification sign outlining the proposed rezoning and County contact information is installed on the parcel. Input being solicited at this stage is related to the specifics of the zoning proposed. A public hearing is also required for a rezoning and notification of the public hearing is provided in the same manner as noted under statutory planning.

At the subdivision stage, the *Municipal Government Act* in some cases requires that upon receiving a complete application the subdivision authority must give notice of receipt of the application to owners of adjacent land. At this point in the process the purpose is to inform adjacent landowners and is done by letter.

For development permits where regulations are being varied or the use is listed as discretionary, legislation requires that adjacent landowners are notified of the decision on a permit. This is done by letter and includes details on the right of appeal.

Current notification costs

- Two newspaper advertisements - \$720 (\$360 each)
- Letter(s) mailed - \$0.92 each (total cost will vary depending on urban or rural and specific property location)
- Administrative costs in the preparation of advertisements and letter mail out packages

Planning and Development Services – communication improvements

We have identified and are currently implementing improvements in how we communicate that do not involve additional costs for an applicant including:

1. Updating the County's advertisements and notification letters to include plain language explanation for residents on:
 - a. why they are receiving the notice;
 - b. where the application falls on the planning continuum;
 - c. if it is for information or requesting input;
 - d. what level of input is being asked for; and

- e. increasing the font sizes for the text in ads and ensuring neighbourhood labels are included where applicable.
2. Placement of the first public hearing ad in the newspaper is done earlier.
3. Additional electronic means of notification reviewing the potential and requirements for social media, digital signs in County facilities, etc.
4. For new statutory plans or major amendments where Strathcona County is the applicant, the Engagement Plan is approved by Council. Administration will ensure this is highlighted for Council's consideration to allow for additional engagement or notification as directed.

Transportation and Engineering Operations - infrastructure programs and projects

Overview

With the number one goal of maintaining safe roads and infrastructure, Transportation Engineering and Operations implements infrastructure programs and projects between May 1 and late October of each year.

Annual maintenance and rehabilitation projects

Improvements to existing infrastructure such as roads, sidewalks, trails, and parking lots.

- The scope of work is consistent and predictable for each program area each year, and the work is usually completed within one season.
- The work incorporates traffic safety improvements based on the Neighbourhood Traffic Safety Action Plan, including traffic management, calming, and education.
- Program-specific communications plans are developed.

One-time capital improvement and open space projects

Significant changes to existing infrastructure or the construction of new infrastructure, including roads, sidewalks, roundabouts, and intersections.

- This can also include rehabilitation projects requiring in-depth engineering design such as complex local roadways and bridges.
- These projects require a multi-year planning, design, and construction process.
- Project-specific communications plans are developed.

Public Engagement for infrastructure projects

When the motion was introduced, some example projects noted were public engagement projects. Whenever there is a public engagement plan related to an infrastructure project, a communications plan is developed to support it. This is separate from the overall communication approach to support annual infrastructure improvements and capital project.

Public engagement ***is required*** when:

- Setting strategic direction for transportation planning.
- There is a significant change(s) to a neighbourhood which requires a review of the traffic patterns and safety impacts.

- There is a persistent community concern confirmed with collected field data related to a traffic safety issue within a neighbourhood.
 - i.e., neighbourhood traffic management and safety studies such as Glen Allan in 2015.

Public engagement ***may be required*** when:

- There is a minor or temporary change to improve safety or operation of transportation infrastructure is considered, which may have considerable public impact.
 - i.e., crosswalk improvement, parking clarification, intersection improvement.

Public engagement ***is not required*** when:

- A safety-related improvement is required.
- The solution follows an engineering best practice or engineering assessment.
- Public input will not have any influence on the outcome.
- When previous plans or strategies have already provided direction (i.e., ARP, neighbourhood plans)

Communication for Infrastructure Projects

The following outlines how infrastructure projects are communicated. No public engagement is involved with these projects.

Communications goal

- The right people are informed at the right time about construction projects that impact them.

Communications objectives

- Residents have access to information about the scope and timelines of work.
- Residents understand how they will be impacted by construction in their area.
- Residents are satisfied with the information they receive about construction in their area.

Communications approach

At the start of construction season, Transportation Engineering and Operations develops both a general campaign for public awareness and project-specific communications plans. Depending on the type of project, a slightly different approach is taken based on a communications assessment, which takes into account factors such as:

- scope of work
- road/infrastructure type (i.e., arterial, residential, rural)
- number of people impacted
- type of impact (i.e., noise, access, detour, delay)
- duration of impact(s)
- public perception (potential for concerns and inquiries)

Measurement and feedback

Over the years, we have used a variety of measurement tools to evaluate the effectiveness of infrastructure project communications. These measurement tools have helped to refine the communications approach over the years:

- end of season program surveys
 - [2022 Annual Rehab post-construction survey](#)
 - [2018 Annual Maintenance Program communications](#)
- analytics (website, social media)
- County Connect
- other corporate tools (mixed-topic surveys, SCOOP (now CountyVoice))

Lessons learned

From the measurement and feedback above, the following improvements have been implemented.

Digital message boards

These are a useful tool for reaching a broad audience and to communicate updates or delays. Timing and placement of digital message boards is critical on collector roads when there are detours or routing changes. Use of message boards needs to be restricted to significant changes to traffic patterns. If used too frequently or for messages other than traffic impacts, the message boards lose their effectiveness and are ignored. In one instance in Nottingham, a message board location was missed, and this created quite a bit of confusion for residents accessing their neighbourhood from that entrance.

Notice letters

These are used for specific and targeted information to those most impacted by projects. The information has been refined over the years to include more updates, information on phases of work, and when timelines or extensive delays occur. Timing of information specifically for what's next and when are you coming back have also been improved.

Mailed notice letters are not as effective for construction requirements as hand-delivered notices.

- In previous projects, we have had limited success in reaching residents. Not everyone reads their mail or can be confused as junk mail.
- At close to one dollar per household, this method can also be quite expensive when sending to entire neighbourhoods.
- The nature of construction requires a quick turn-around for notification that mailed letters cannot accommodate.

County Connect feedback

Combined with survey data, County Connect feedback showed us that improving the timing of the communication may help decrease the number of inquiries in specific areas, primarily those related to "what's next?" or "when are you coming back?" When working directly adjacent to a private property, it is important to provide updates throughout the project, i.e., when there is a lapse in work, delays, scope of work changes (phases of work). In

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these instances, a second or multiple notices were added. Spikes in inquiries also showed communication gaps between project milestones. By looking at these spikes, we were able to improve the timing of communication.

Increasing communications is not always the answer

When working in specific locations where only a targeted audience is impacted, communications channels such as the newspaper and social media are not as effective. These channels are meant for a broad audience and are primarily used for construction projects on major arterials such as Baseline Road.

In addition, signage is used for short periods of time to ensure their effectiveness. Sign overload in the community can create “noise” and increases the risk that people will start to tune out.

Ongoing challenges

Reaching our audience

It can be difficult to reach residents through communications. Even when information is shared, feedback shows that information is not read until construction is underway.

Project challenges are not solved by communications

Construction can have project challenges with timing and delays, contractor issues and weather. Communications can help to inform but cannot influence dissatisfaction with overall construction changes or improvements.

Transportation Engineering Operations – communications improvements in 2024

Traffic calming communication

- Identify traffic calming projects earlier so administration can improve communications planning and notification. This could include direct letters to adjacent homeowners, project signage, web pages and social media education of traffic safety method and tools.
- Improved clarity on when residents are engaged on traffic calming measures.
- Create communication protocols to support traffic safety in the community – clarifying what is communicated, when and to whom.

Notice letters

Continue to refine notice letter content to ensure information is clear and easy to understand. By using feedback from residents and future surveys, information will continually be updated and improved.

Timing

Review timing of project updates, especially when a project has encountered delays. Complaints and concerns often arise when the project has gone on for an extended period of time. This is usually due to weather or other construction challenges. Improving the timing for updates may help to improve understanding.

Planning

The new three-year capital plan will help to improve advanced communications planning. Currently, planning for communications support occurs annually.

Evaluation

Expand scope of program evaluations to include more infrastructure programs and/or projects. This information will be used to determine if any additional improvements are required.

Council and Committee History

September 19, 2023 THAT administration prepare a report for Council's consideration by the end of Q4 2023 on options and costs to increase communication with residents on infrastructure projects, land use changes and related projects that are beyond our existing level of service, examples include but are not limited to improved physical signage, additional and/or improved newspaper advertisements, online advertisements and direct mailouts.

Other Impacts

Policy: Statutory Plan Procedure, Subdivision Procedure

Legislative/Legal: The *Municipal Government Act* outlines notification and input requirements as part of statutory plan preparation, land use bylaw amendments and subdivision and development.

Financial/Budget: n/a

Interdepartmental: Corporate Communications (including engagement)

Master Plan/Framework: n/a

Enclosure

1 Communications update for infrastructure, land use changes and related projects presentation