



Policies and Procedures

Policy Name:

Public Participation

Section:

Council

Sub Section:

Policy Number:

600-007

Approved:

April 25, 2018

Revised:

Introduction

Foothills County values input from our landowners and is committed to engaging with citizens and stakeholders.

Public participation in the decisions of local government is important to ensure that the desires, needs and expectations of the citizens and landowners who will be impacted by those decisions are considered. Research shows that consistently engaging with the public can lead to better decisions, stronger relationships between citizens and government and enhanced confidence in elected officials, decision making processes and the government itself.

Not every project or decision made by Council will require a comprehensive engagement process and there are varying levels of engagement that may be undertaken. It is important for each project or decision to carefully consider what level of engagement is appropriate given the scale, scope and potential impact and at what stage(s) in the project it is most appropriate to initiate the engagement process. The level of engagement undertaken should consider the degree to which the public input is able to influence the project; if there is little room for refinement or limited ability to influence a decision then an extensive engagement process is not useful, cost effective or appropriate.

It should be noted that even when it is determined that a public engagement process is not required by this policy, there may still be a requirement for a Public Hearing of Council under the Municipal Government Act.

Purpose

The purpose of the Public Participation Policy is to:

- Provide guiding principles for public engagement processes,
- Outline under what circumstances a public participation process must be undertaken, and
- Describe the types of approaches that may be used to engage with the public.

Guiding Principles

Authenticity

Public participation must be honest and authentic and must have the ability to influence the project or decision making process. The feedback that is received should be carefully considered and should be used as it has been said it will be used.

Timeliness

Public participation processes should be initiated as early as is feasible in a project; when there is still time for the feedback received to influence the course of the project in a meaningful way.

Transparency

When undertaking public participation it should be stated up front how the feedback will be used and the degree to which it will influence the project or decision.

Inclusiveness

Everyone should have a voice and everyone's voice is important. Every effort should be made to engage as many different groups as possible in the public participation process. Using several different methods of engagement can help to ensure that everyone is aware of the process and that everyone who wishes to has the opportunity to participate.

Responsiveness

Public participation processes should be designed with the flexibility to respond when something is not working the way it was predicted it would.

Accountability

Following public participation activities, there should be a reporting process that could range from a detailed report summarizing feedback received and how it was addressed to a summary of concerns raised at a public hearing. Reports to Council should include a summary of any engagement that was undertaken and the results of that engagement.

Privacy

Feedback received in a public participation process should be used in the way it was said it would be used. All information will be collected and used in compliance with FOIP guidelines and practices and every effort will be made to protect people's personal information.

Fiscal Responsibility

Public Participation processes can be costly and so should only be undertaken when beneficial and should be thoughtfully designed to achieve the greatest value for the cost.

When to Undertake Engagement

The Public Participation Policy applies to any of the following when they are likely to have a significant impact on a sizeable number of citizens or stakeholders:

- The establishment of Council priorities,
- The development of municipal plans,

- The creation or amendment of policies and bylaws,
- The implementation of programs, projects or other initiatives,
- The significant amendment to existing programs, projects or other initiatives.

In addition, the Public Participation Policy applies when:

- There is legislation or regulation requiring engagement;
- There is municipal policy requiring engagement;
- Engagement has been requested by Council;
- There has been a promise of engagement made to the public; or
- The public have requested engagement be conducted.

Approaches for Engagement

There are many excellent resources that describe different approaches to public engagement, such as the International Association for Public Participation’s (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation. In most cases, different approaches to engagement are arranged on a continuum where strictly providing information to the public (“Informing”) is on one end and giving the public the authority to make the decision (“Empowering”) is on the other. Foothills County continuum was adapted from the IAP2 continuum and includes the following types of engagement: Inform and Educate, Refine, Collaborate and Empower.



Adapted from IAP2 Spectrum for Public Engagement

Inform and Educate

Informing and Educating are engagement activities intended to provide the public with accurate and objective information to help them understand an issue.

While Informing is a component of any public participation process, it may not be an engagement activity in itself. Most of the projects undertaken with direction from Council or decisions made by the Council of the County will have an “Inform” component by virtue of being published in the minutes of Foothills County Council meetings.

Engagement activities designed to Educate residents or stakeholders may be appropriate in instances where there is an issue or circumstance that does not necessarily involve a decision of Council, which County residents should be made aware of. For example, if the Province approves legislation that will have an impact on services the municipality provides or the way those services are delivered, the County may undertake activities to educate residents on those changes.

Refine

When a project or decision has the potential to directly impact a group of residents or landowners, there should be an opportunity for them to provide feedback on what is proposed and potentially Refine the proposal. In some cases this will be accomplished through the public hearing process; in other cases there may be an open house, public meeting or survey. Gathering feedback will generally involve collecting comments or concerns on a proposed decision, scenario or design that is being contemplated. It is important that it is feasible that refinements to the proposal may be incorporated or that the decision could be influenced based on the feedback received.

Collaborate

Some projects or decisions have the potential to impact a large portion of the County's residents or may have more significant or longer lasting social, financial or environmental impacts. In such cases a more collaborative approach to engagement should be undertaken. This would involve engaging with the public early in the process to contribute to identifying goals for the project and then later on providing opportunities for input into policy or design.

In cases where the project is likely to have very significant impacts on future decisions or County wide policy, for instance a Municipal Development Plan or other strategic plan, an even higher degree of collaboration may be appropriate in the form of a working group or steering committee. These groups, made up of stakeholders or the public Collaborate extensively in the project on an on-going basis from start to finish.

Empower

Empowering occurs when the power to make a decision or implement a project is put in the hands of the public or a stakeholder group. This could be accomplished through a plebiscite where the public votes on an issue or it could be done by striking an ad-hoc committee to undertake a project or made a decision. In either case, there is a commitment that Council will implement whatever decision is made. It is important to note that Council in most cases cannot actually delegate their decision making authority and that the final decision must remain in their hands.

This level of engagement is not commonly used in municipal government decision making and is often not possible due to the legislation that empowers municipal governments.

Policy Compliance

While every effort will be made to adhere to Foothills County Public Participation Policy; Section 216.1 (5) of the Modernized Municipal Government Act specifically states the "no resolution or bylaw of a council may be challenged on the ground that it was made without complying with a public participation policy established by a resolution of the council."

Definitions

"Stakeholders" means the residents of the County, as well as other individuals, organizations or persons that may have an interest in, or are affected by, a decision made by the County.

"Public Participation" includes a variety of non-statutory opportunities where Municipal Stakeholders receive information and/or provide input to the County.