



Date: 20/02/2019

AGENDA ITEM SUMMARY

To: Chair and Directors, Cariboo Regional District Board
And To: John MacLean, Chief Administrative Officer
From: Emily Epp, Manager of Communications
Date of Meeting: Cariboo Regional District Board_Mar01_2019
File: 1470-01

Short Summary:

2019 Budget Consultation Feedback

Voting:

Corporate Vote - Unweighted

Memorandum:

Budget Consultation Overview

At the January 18, 2019 Board meeting, the Board approved the provisional 2019-2023 five-year financial plan for public consultation and made the following resolution:

That the following recommendation from the Finance-Budget Committee meeting, held December 6, 2018, be endorsed: That staff develop a communications policy/strategy to explain all significant budgetary increases.

Staff developed a communication plan, attached, that included creating a 4-page handout that provided a plain language overview of the budget. Along with detailed documents, charts and graphs relating to the five-year financial plan, this overview was made available digitally at www.cariboord.ca/budget and with hard copies at the three CRD offices and area branch libraries (Quesnel, 100 Mile and Williams Lake).

An online survey was developed to capture residents' feedback on the budget. A total of 274 responses were collected. Further details on the results of the survey are included below.

Emails, social media posts, newspaper advertising and Facebook advertising were used to raise awareness of the budget consultation process and encourage residents to share their feedback. A summary of the Facebook comments received related to the 2019 budget are included for the Board's review, along with the one email received and one letter to the editor.

Additional communication and engagement tools were used regarding three services with notable tax or user fee increases – 150 Mile Fire Protection and Red Bluff and Alexis Creek sewer utilities. Newspaper, radio and Facebook advertising were used along with posters and mailed flyers to promote the events.

- An open house was held concerning the Red Bluff sewer utility on Feb. 5. About 40 members of the public came to the Red Bluff sewer open house to discuss the tax increase and ask questions. Attendees were encouraged to fill out the survey in-person or online to share their feedback about the budget. Three paper copies of the survey were completed at the meeting.
- On Feb. 13, a public meeting was held for the 150 Mile House Fire Protection budget. Forty-one residents attended the meeting, listened to a presentation from staff and the Fire Chief and asked questions. A summary of the questions and comments from the meeting are attached.
- A letter was sent to all users of the Alexis Creek sewer regarding the proposed user fee increase. A copy of the letter is attached.

Information on the approved 2019 budget will also be included in the upcoming tax notice insert sent to all CRD residents via the Province's tax notice mailout.

Survey Results

In total, 274 budget surveys were completed. All the survey results are attached, but the following is a synopsis of the results.

- The majority of respondents were from Electoral Area A (25%), followed by Electoral Area F (12%) and Electoral Area L (10%).
- On the questions gauging understanding of the budget process (Q2-Q5), 48% of respondents felt they extremely clearly or very clearly understood the budget process and aspects of how CRD budgets work. Interestingly though, when directly asked if they understand how CRD budgets are prepared and applied (Q5), only 29% felt they understood extremely clearly or very clearly.
- When asked which service levels should be increased, the top three services indicated were Protective Services (Fire Departments & Search and Rescue) at 42%, Protective Services (Emergency Planning, Response & Recovery Efforts) at 38% and Recreation Services (Arenas, Pools, Parks, Trails, Community Halls) at 32%.
- When asked which service levels should be maintained, the top three services indicated were Airport Services at 76%, Environmental Services (Garbage & Recycling) at 73%, and Utilities Services (Water & Sewer) at 69%.
- When asked which service levels should be decreased, the top three services indicated were Administrative Services (Finance, Communication, Grants, Office Expenses, Staff Wages) at 41%, Development Services (Community Planning, Zoning, Bylaw Enforcement, Building Inspection) at 24%, and Environmental Services (Invasive Plant Management) at 24%.
- 34% of respondents said they are satisfied with the services they receive from the CRD and 28% feel the taxes they pay for CRD services are appropriate (rated a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale).
- A large variety of responses were given when asked about additional services they would like to see the CRD provide, with the top three answers relating to fire protection, pools, or water services.
- Overall, 30% of respondents said they were satisfied with the CRD's budget consultation process (rated a 4 or 5 on a 5-point scale).

Success of the Budget Consultation Process

Ahead of the 2019 budget consultation process, a communication plan was developed with goals, strategies and tactics, along with measurables to evaluate if the communication tactics were a success.

To gauge the CRD's efforts to gather residents' feedback, one of the goals was to increase budget survey responses by 50%. The last budget survey conducted was in 2015 and only 19 responses were received; in 2014, the budget survey had 63 responses which was the highest response rate before this year. The response rate this year of 274 completed surveys is 14 times higher than 2015 and 4 times higher than any of our previous budget surveys. In addition, one email was received and a moderate amount (24) of Facebook comments and questions were generated.

In terms of meeting attendance, 40 people came to the Red Bluff sewer open house and 41 attended the 150 Mile Fire Protection meeting. In 2015, three budget consultation open houses were held. Fourteen people attended the South Cariboo event, with 6 people each at the meetings in the Central and North Cariboo. Holding meetings specific to notable tax increases appears to draw greater attendance than general budget meetings.

In the survey, the respondents rated their satisfaction with the budget consultation process with a weighted average of 3.1 on a 5-point scale. The goal was to see that rating at 3.8, indicating there is room for improvement.

Throughout the consultation process, staff also wanted to increase residents' awareness and understanding of the CRD's financial planning process. 83% of respondents felt they understood the budget process and aspects of how CRD budgets work, meaning they rated their understanding as extremely, very or somewhat clear. The goal was to have 60% of people indicate they had full or some understanding of the process and the results exceeded that goal. However, there are still improvements to be made to increase people's understanding. Particularly since only 48% of respondents stating they extremely clearly or very clearly understood the budget process and, when directly asked if they understand how CRD budgets are prepared and applied (Q5), only 29% indicated they understood extremely clearly or very clearly.

In terms of raising awareness of the CRD's budgeting process, there was a 250% increase in traffic to our budget webpage on the CRD website (www.cariboord.ca/budget). This is a good measure to note that there was increased awareness of the budgeting process leading people to look for information about it on our website. Out of that web traffic, 43 surveys were completed directly from the CRD website link to the survey.

In summary, the budget consultation process was a success based on the internal measures as we exceeded our goals and previous measures for survey results and meeting attendance. Further, we exceeded our goals for increasing public understanding and raising awareness of the budgeting process.

However, with CRD residents rating our budget consultation efforts as 3.1 on a 5-point scale, we have room for improvement towards meeting the public's expectations regarding our budget consultation process.

Attachments:

- 2019 Budget Consultation Communication Plan
- Budget Related Facebook Comments
- Budget Related Emails
- Budget Related Letter to the Editor – 100 Mile Free Press Feb. 14
- 150 Mile Budget Meeting Comments
- Alexis Creek Sewer Budget Letter to Users
- 2019 Budget Consultation Survey Results

Financial Implications:

In total, all the communication tactics used in the 2019 budget consultation process cost approximately \$4,500, which came out of the Administration budget.

Policy Implications:

The current budget consultation policy (No. 2015-7-66), which was adopted in 2015, reads:

That the Board discontinue the centralized public budget consultation meetings and instead have the information available on the CRD website as well as having a copy available for public viewing at the front counter of the CRD offices and libraries.

This policy will need to be revised if the Board wishes to continue with the current model of providing a plain language summary of the provisional budget and only holding public events or sending letters as appropriate, based on notable tax increases.

Alignment with Strategic Plan:

- Ensuring Sufficient and Sustainable Funding
- Building on our Relationships
- Providing Cost Effective High Quality Services
- Focusing on Being Well Governed

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CAO Comments:

I concur with the recommendation and want to express my appreciation for the efforts of Emily Epp, Scott Reid and the rest of the Management Team for their efforts in undertaking this process.

Options:

1. Endorse recommendation;
2. Receipt and other action.

Recommendation:

That the agenda item summary from Emily Epp, dated February 20, 2019, regarding the 2019 budget consultation feedback, be received. Further, that the Board consider the feedback from the budget consultation process before approving the final 2019-2023 financial plan.