

Cariboo Regional District Engagement Strategy

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Purpose:

Our communities are constantly changing, and the expectations from our residents and interested parties are evolving. A higher level of access to information and government officials coupled with increasing awareness over the impact of various decisions made by the CRD promotes a higher demand for involvement by residents and stakeholders.

Objective:

Promote meaningful public participation in the CRD's decision making process to facilitate better conversations between the CRD and residents so we can be responsive to the needs and wants of the people we serve.

Motives:

The Board has identified improvements to our public communications and engagement processes as a strategic priority for the organization. While there are numerous reasons for this, the principle and driving reason is that trust is lacking in the CRD as a governing body from residents and other parties that have interests in our operations. By improving how we facilitate public participation and engage with residents, and by clarifying the regional district's jurisdiction, programs, and services through our Communications Strategy, we will build public trust in the decisions we make on behalf of the region.

Outcomes

Through this strategy, we aim to achieve the following outcomes:

1. Public trust in the CRD will improve because we will actively seek to listen to, understand, and recognize the concerns and aspirations of the public.
2. Our public policy decisions will be supported and sustainable because they reflect the public's concerns and aspirations for the Cariboo region.
3. Our service budgets and infrastructure plans will be better aligned with the public's needs because they will be informed by public participation.
4. The public will have a greater understanding of the regional district's jurisdiction, programs, and governance because they will have participated in it; and
5. We will meet and then exceed our statutory obligations for public participation.

A history of engagement

The CRD has a long history of engaging with citizens, interested parties, and rights and title holders who are impacted by our decisions or have interests in their outcomes. We must comply with several legal requirements for engagement under the *Local Government Act*, including requirements to:

- Empower citizens with the ability to decide on bylaws which authorize the establishment of new services or long-term borrowing;
- Consult citizens and interested parties prior to adopting annual financial plans, land use and development bylaws, and solid waste management plans; and
- Inform citizens and interested parties about the activities and plans of the regional district through multiple information channels.

In addition, the CRD has initiated public engagement which exceed these legal requirements. Examples include:

- 2017/2018 Wildfire Consultations

The 2017 and 2018 Wildfire consultations were conducted following the Cariboo's most devastating wildfires in recorded history. The consultation process was designed to collect feedback from residents and stakeholders about the interagency response, understand recovery needs, and improve how the regional district approach its emergency operations in the future.

- Bouchie-Milburn Neighbourhood Plan

The Bouchie-Milburn Neighbourhood Plan was the CRD's first attempt to create a community-specific land use plan. Engagement activities included numerous activities which involved residents in the planning process and setting land use planning priorities, consulting them on initiatives within the plan as the process progressed, and informing residents with status updates.

- Community Townhalls

Townhalls were held in each electoral area, typically at least once per year. These served as venues to consult residents on the proposed budget for each year, and offered an opportunity to identify any concerns and aspirations related to regional district services. These townhalls were discontinued after 2015 following low public participation at these events.

What is Public Participation?

Also referred to as public engagement, Public Participation is any process that involves the public in problem-solving or decision-making. It is founded on the belief that residents/constituents/citizens should have meaningful opportunities to participate in making decisions that impact their community. This is founded in the principle of two-way communications and welcomes them into the decision-making process by ensuring timely information and awareness of opportunities to provide input before decisions are made.

Not all topics require the same level of public engagement, and different strategies should be employed based on the impact of the decision or change on the constituent group. Different tools and techniques are employed based on the level of input that is needed to inform the decision.

What is the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2)?

IAP2 Canada is an association of professionals in the field of public participation who seek to advance and extend the practice of public participation through training, certification, standards, values, and advocacy around the world.

The IAP2 developed several tools that have become commonplace amongst local governments. The Core Values and Spectrum of Public Participation assist in establishing clear expectations and defining the level of participation in any public engagement process.

Why do we engage?

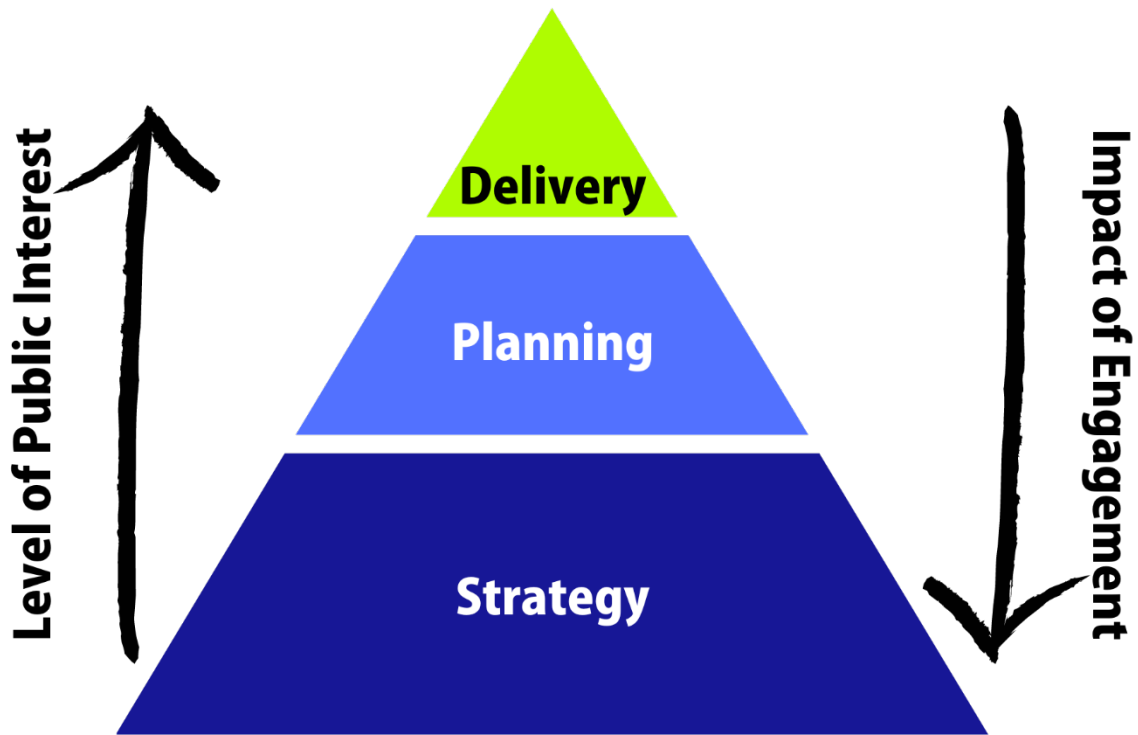
We engage because, at the end of the day, the people most affected by the services we deliver are the residents who pay for and benefit from them. While the Cariboo Regional District employs various technical experts who are knowledgeable in their field, no one knows their community and its nuances better than the people living and doing business in it.

When we engage, their input becomes part of the decision-making process, helping elected officials, residents, and staff create communities that are responsive to what the community has indicated is important to them.

When public engagement is meaningful, everyone gains something valuable. Governments benefit from hearing diverse perspectives and understanding the public's interests, concerns, and priorities, and the public gains a greater understanding of roles, responsibilities, and requirements. With increased communications between the regional district and residents, our accountability to them is enhanced.

By providing timely access to quality information, there is less misinformation, and residents feel heard.

Graphics: When to engage?



Key factors of successful engagement:

- The level of public interest in an engagement and the impact of that engagement have an inverse relationships. More work will be required to recruit participants during earlier phases of decision making, along with clearer framing of the impacts during later stages of decision making.
- The level of engagement increases as the impact on citizens increases. Engage as early as possible when the impacts are greater.
- Engagement should always be open, transparent, balanced, inclusive, and respectful. All participants are there to share their perspectives and experiences with the governing body, even if they aren't shared by its representatives.
- Sufficient time should be provided for participation throughout a variety of opportunities. Considering the unique needs and time restrictions for participants will reduce barriers to engagement and consequently improve the accessibility.
- The roles, authority, and responsibilities of all interested parties should be made clear from the outset.
- Costs should be minimized using internal resources. External subject matters and facilitators should be used only for extremely technical decisions or if the subject matter is extremely controversial and emotions are high.

- Engagement is a continuously improving process. Debriefing on prior engagements, defining and measuring success, and identifying opportunities for improvement are essential to improving public engagement's value and effectiveness.

Public Engagement can:

- Allow community members and decision makers to hear a variety of perspectives.
- Manage differences, establish direction for moving forward on complex issues, and building understanding regarding trade-offs.
- Foster confidence and trust in local government.
- Build better neighbourhoods and stronger communities through common understanding and shared aspirations.
- Correct misinformation and address hidden obstacles or unknown consequences early in the process.

When do we engage?

Whether the public needs to be engaged in a decision should be a critical consideration when developing any new project or considering changes to a service or program. Public engagement may not be required or suitable in every case, but when it is, we want to ensure we are engaging with residents as early as possible. When engagement does not occur, is done without intent to impact the decision, or is rushed, there may be negative impacts to the project schedule, costs, and public support. Early dialogue is important in determining when and to what extent public engagement is needed.

The Community Charter and Local Government Act outline the minimum requirements for when the regional district must engage – these requirements are the minimum standards and should often be exceeded.

Who does what? Roles and Responsibilities

Elected Officials

Elected officials make policy and governance decisions that represent the interests and values of the communities they serve. They have an important role as decision makers and advocates for public engagement and can contribute in the following ways:

- Represent residents and connect with them to determine top priorities for engagement.
- Prioritize engagement efforts by working with staff to identify areas where public input can make a meaningful difference to decisions and help set public engagement priorities.
- Help promote engagement initiatives and opportunities to facilitate a high rate of participation by a wide range of residents.
- Direct residents to the established processes for garnering, monitoring, and compiling input, and avoid circumventing these.
- Allow staff to take the lead role in identifying best practices and methods for engaging the public on various issues.
- Consider input gathered from residents and stakeholders when making decisions and clarify the rationale for decisions reached.
- Ensure time and resources are allocated to support successful engagement efforts.
- Listen and observe public engagement and processes.

Staff

Staff lead the planning, implementation, and reporting back from engagement initiatives. As trained professionals, staff members are responsible for developing and applying professional expertise in public engagement, as well as being technical experts that provide background and advice on decisions being made. Staff responsibilities include the following:

- Work with elected officials to identify where public input can make a meaningful difference to decisions, program development and service delivery.
- Establish channels and processes to clearly identify community priorities for engagement, then ensure that the organization responds.
- Establish and communicate engagement priorities, then apply a consistent set of policies and procedures in designing and implementing engagement activities.
- Consult with elected officials and consider previous public feedback regarding engagement priorities, process design, framing issues, effective communications, and increasing engagement over time.
- Ensure timely and respectful communication with all those who engage and show how their input has been used to influence decisions, programs, and services.
- Engage in ongoing learning and professional development about public engagement best practices.
- Ensure that community input is well documented and that communication efforts are as complete and well-timed as possible.

Citizens

Citizens contribute to informed decision making and the quality of life in their community by sharing their ideas, experiences, and concerns in a constructive and respectful way. Their contributions can include the following:

- Help identify community needs and priorities.
- Identify barriers to participation.
- Make efforts to stay current and learn more about issues within the community.
- Participate in engagement initiatives and encourage others to participate.
- Express their point of view and contribute ideas while respecting opposing perspectives in a respectful way.
- Be willing to listen to and learn from other community members.
- Vote in local government elections.

First Nations & Indigenous Governing Bodies

First nations are important rights holders, and we are committed to working closely with the First Nations on whose territories we operate and make decisions on. Consultation and engagement with First Nations occur independently from the engagement of the broader public and requires a customized approach.


Interested Parties

Specific citizens groups, societies, and associations will have varying degrees of interest in CRD engagement initiatives and will overall have more coordination and engagement with areas of interest. These groups can support and improve our engagement efforts by identifying key areas of interest, insights into specific issues to explore during engagement activities, and promote awareness through use of their own communications channels and networks.

IAP2'S PUBLIC PARTICIPATION SPECTRUM



The IAP2 Federation has developed the Spectrum to help groups define the public's role in any public participation process. The IAP2 Spectrum is quickly becoming an international standard.

INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION 					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL	To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

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Core values of engagement

Our engagement practices will be guided by the following core values to ensure that the contribution of citizens, interested parties, and rights and title holders are actualized and given meaning during the decision making process, while being true to the intent behind the engagement.

1. Inclusive and Accessible

Everyone who could potentially be affected by a decision must be given an opportunity to provide input.

Successfully adopting this principle means the CRD will:

- Engage with people where they live, online, and in-person.
- Proactively seek the involvement of a wide range of voices, including seniors, children, youth, parents of young children, and newcomers.
- Identify barriers to participation and ensure they are addressed.
- Use a diverse type of communications and engagement methods, including digital and non-digital methods, in-person and remote methods, etc.

2. Respectful and responsive

The engagement process must be thoughtful and relevant and must value the input and interests of participants.

Successfully adopting this principle means the CRD will:

- Initiate early, well before decisions are to be considered, to give participants time to make informed choices and offer meaningful contributions.
- Plan for appropriate budget and other resources.
- Provide a process that is transparent, open, and adaptive to community needs and interests.
- Record and share the views and ideas expressed, as well as how they affected the outcome.

3. Clear and Transparent

Information about the project and engagement process must be easy to understand. Communication must be open, honest, thorough, and frequent.

Successfully adopting this principle means the CRD will:

- Accurately communicate the level of involvement and influence participants can expect to have.
- Provide clear, concise, objective information in accessible language that is free from technical jargon and promotes better understanding of the project.
- Communicate constraints and contextual information that improves understanding of the issues, including about the roles of engagement team members.
- Widely communicate regular updates, including information about the schedule, milestones, and opportunities for involvement.
- Create communication material and use multiple channels to improve awareness of engagement opportunities with impacted communities.
- Report back to participants on the views, ideas, and feedback that was received and how it impacted the outcome.

4. Continuous Improvement

Each process is evaluated to ensure lessons learned can be captured and applied to future engagements.

Successfully adopting this principle means the CRD will:

- Evaluate completed engagement projects against guiding principles and best practices to measure success.
- Ask participants for feedback on the process used to engage them for continuous feedback.
- Foster creativity, seek innovative methods, and look for ways to continually improve.
- Keep up to date on technological tools and communication platforms to reach the whole region.
- Commit to train CRD representatives to provide current information about public engagement practices.

Turning Strategy into Action

Approach

While engagement is desired and practiced within the Cariboo Regional District, there are numerous barriers that can present themselves through any public participation process that impact our overall success in facilitating public participation. Barriers can range from low levels of public interest to low levels of trust in the regional district, time limitations or technical complexity, and difficulties reaching audiences or desensitizing a controversial issue.

To be successful, resources are required to manage future engagements. The present approach is to outsource engagement activities to third parties, which has benefits and drawbacks. One impact is a fractured approach to engagement, as each facilitator will have their own style and a unique understanding of the CRD's context. Going forward, the focus of the strategy will be on ***enhancing internal capacity to engage***.

A phased approach is necessary to develop a ***culture of engagement*** within the CRD, ***build public trust*** in the approach, and support a ***continuous improvement mindset***. Each phase is designed with a series of desired outputs and outcomes in mind, before proceeding to the next phase of implementation.

Phase 1 – Train, develop, and support

1. Conduct a baseline evaluation of the CRD's communications and engagement efforts to date.

This strategy is interlinked and dependent on the Regional District's Communications Strategy. The principal goal of the Communications Strategy is to evaluate our current communications efforts to date and identify key areas for improvement. This opportunity can also be used to inform future focuses for developing our public engagement programs. This objective is not expected to have a direct financial implication aside from staff time.

2. Provide IAP2 Fundamentals of Public Participation training to CRD staff who play a role in supporting and informing engagement activities.

The development of a public participation / engagement culture is founded on support for training. Several hesitations or opposition to P2 / engagement can be linked to poorly designed and managed engagements, which impact support at an organizational level. To redress this and inspire the mindset of P2/E, group training with an experienced facilitator is necessary. This objective has a modest cost associated with it which will require budgetary resources.

3. Provide governance training for CRD Board on engagement governance and decision-making implications.

At the same time, the Board itself should be provided with training to further their understanding of P2/E as a mechanism for empowering their communities and enabling their participation in the decision-making process. The Board's understanding of P2/E is crucial because they are the ultimate decision-makers for the CRD. For engagement to be prioritized within the organization, there must be a shared understanding of what it is and how it impacts decision-making. This objective has a small cost associated with it which will require budgetary resources.

4. Build engagement planning into decision making processes.

As a strategic priority of the Board, P2/E should be visible and present during critical decision-making processes. For example, during budget deliberations, debate on Board meeting items, and priority setting meetings. AS a factor in how the Board decides on CRD issues, mechanisms should be in place to promote awareness of engagement conducted, provide transparency on how the Board is engaging, maintain feedback loops, and ensure accountability. This objective is not expected to have a direct financial implication aside from staff time.

5. Improve internal communications pathways and processes.

For P2/E to be successful, we must align our organization's understanding of various projects and initiatives across departments and multiple levels of staff. Building awareness will promote a greater awareness of projects, contribute to a sense of belonging, facilitate information sharing and ideation, and support change management and crisis communications efforts. This objective is not expected to have a direct financial implication aside from staff time.

6. Develop an engagement planning and delivery toolkit and provide training to IAP2 trained staff.

A toolkit will be required to successfully plan, design, and deliver public engagement activities. Using templates from IAP2 and other local governments, the CRD can establish a toolkit for trained staff to use to prepare for engagement activities. This objective is not expected to have a direct financial implication aside from staff time.

Phase 2 – Extend, implement, and enhance

1. Train select staff the level of achieving an IAP2 Certificate in Public Engagement.

Building on Phase 1 training, a smaller group of key staff members are to receive training through IAP2 to achieve a certificate in public engagement. This training will enable certain staff to design public engagement processes, select appropriate methods to deliver engagement objectives, and carry out engagement activities with support from the Communications Department. The cost to deliver this training is like the cost to provide IAP2 fundamentals to a larger group of staff.

2. Develop a project management system designed to include engagement planning.

Communicating on a project-basis serves as a foundational building block for internal communication and public engagement. Using project management principles and practices, in addition to toolkits developed through IAP2, a system to effectively plan projects and necessary communications will be developed. This will allow the organization to identify opportunities for public engagement and effectively manage resource constraints. This objective is not expected to have a direct financial implication aside from staff time.

3. Develop a policy and decision-making process that supports advance planning for engagement activities and exercises.

This objective builds on Phase 1's objectives to incorporate public engagement into decision making and project management processes. Based on experience, this will seek to tie the two processes together in a manner that supports full-cycle engagement planning, policy development, and program implementation. This objective is not expected to have a direct financial implication aside from staff time.

4. Expand the CRD's engagement activities as appropriate.

With engagement incorporated into key planning processes, the regional district will be able to better identify engagement needs, opportunities, and challenges. This will allow for planning according to the needs of the organization and public at varying levels of decision-making impact, and utilize the knowledge being developed within the organization. This objective is not expected to have a direct financial implication aside from staff time.

5. Develop and utilize feedback mechanisms within engagement exercises to collect ongoing feedback from participants on the CRD's engagement efforts.

As part of ongoing evaluation, collect feedback from participants in engagement activities about the overall process and experience. This feedback can be used to inform future engagement activities and refine processes to improve overall participant experience. This objective is not expected to have a direct financial implication aside from staff time.

Phase 3 – Evaluate, reflect, and look forward

1. Consult with citizens, interested parties, rights/title holders, etc. on the CRD's engagement efforts, to gain perspectives on what has improved, what needs to be refined, and where further investments can be made.

An evaluation should occur leading into the first year of the next Board term, to inform future engagement activities and program changes. This evaluation will provide a window into approximately three years of engagement program development and allow for the public to provide a holistic perspective on how the CRD's engagement program has improved, where it needs refinement, and areas for further development.

2. Review the feedback from the consultation with senior management and the Board to determine next steps, refining the strategy to meet future needs and direction.

Feedback gathered from the engagement strategy evaluation will be utilized by CRD staff and Board members to set future directions on how we deliver engagement activities. As the Board transitions to a new term following the 2026 elections, it will need to determine how it wishes to adjust the CRD's approach to public engagement and organizational decision making to fit its vision, mission, and strategic priorities.

The future of engagement

As noted throughout this strategy, the CRD is developing a comprehensive engagement program, and outlines key actions and principles that will be used to guide that development. This strategy serves as the foundation for future practices, operating standards, and continuing the Regional District's important role in providing for good government of the region, providing services and laws for the benefit of residents, stewarding public assets, and fostering the well-being of the region.

As this strategy is time limited, we will consider our future approaches and development of our engagement efforts following the end of this strategy's lifecycle. This will allow us to learn from our forays into public engagement, adapt to changing circumstances, and meet the engagement needs of the citizens and interested parties we serve.