

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT POLICY

Subject: Public Participation & Engagement

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The County of Northern Lights values and recognizes that Governance is a partnership between its Citizens, Organizations, Industries, Businesses, Administration, and Elected Officials; and

That each have a meaningful role and voice, and are encouraged to build community capacity by participating in, being involved in, being listened to, developing understanding and awareness of County issues, and interacting through a Public Participation and Engagement Process.

The County of Northern Lights supports a continuum of engagement that will be reviewed, evaluated, and responsive to the growing needs and vision of the 'County Community' and Region.

Chief Elected Official

Chief Administrative Officer

I. POLICY STATEMENT

The County of Northern Lights encourages its Citizens and Stakeholders to participate in meaningful and active engagement, sharing values and perspective on issues and projects facing the County.

Council wants its policies, projects, and services to be relevant to and successful for the people they are intended to serve; and therefore, public participation and engagement play an important role in the democratic process. It can help provide information to support decision-making, give a voice to a wide range of citizens, increase public confidence in government activity, and ensure that resources are targeted and allocated effectively.

In accordance with Section 216.1 of the Municipal Government Act, this Public Participation & Engagement Policy has been developed to formalize existing participation practices and create guidelines for future opportunities of meaningful public participation and engagement in decisions that *directly* impact the public.

The Public Participation and Engagement Policy is *in addition to* and does not modify or replace the existing statutory public hearing requirements in the *Municipal Government Act*. Fundamentally, public participation means that the local government and its administration, are consciously making efforts to create opportunities to inform and involve its citizens, be responsive to input and close the loop by communicating how input influenced the outcome.

What Public Participation and Engagement does not mean is that everyone will always agree on decisions and actions that are made by Council. The County of Northern Lights has a diverse population scattered throughout a large geographic area which naturally generates varying views, different interests and approaches to decisions. However, Council is committed to listening to all of those opinions and to consider them in the decision-making process.

II. POLICY PRINCIPLES

The County of Northern Lights is committed to a public participation and engagement process that informs and encourages two-way dialogue, builds trust, and supports effective decision-making. The process will be guided by principles that support Council's desire to govern effectively by being responsive to the needs and values of its citizens.

1. Public participation is based on the belief that whenever practical, those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. Public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will be respected, valued and will actively contribute to Council's decision-making.
3. Public participation seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
4. Public participation seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
5. Public participation provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.

6. Public participation promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
7. Public participation communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

III. ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

THE ROLE OF COUNCIL

Council members can and should promote, attend, and observe engagement activities, but should not act as participants nor try to influence the input being gathered. In the realm of public participation, Council is responsible for:

- Helping to identify issues that may need public participation;
- Reviewing recommendations on issues requiring public participation and seeing the importance of various issues relative to the capacity of the organization;
- Respecting and/or supporting the role of Advisory committees in considering the input received from these committees;
- Promoting public participation opportunities and encouraging participation of identified audiences;
- Attending and observing public participation and engagements events. Communicating positively to citizens, stakeholders, and media about the importance of such events and activities to the County;
- Respecting and supporting the role of staff in designing, executing, and reporting from public participation activities;
- Carefully reviewing the findings of participation initiatives, as presented and summarized by administration;
- Using these inputs as an essential part of Council discussions and decision-making; and
- Supporting a continuum of participation and engagement that will be reviewed, evaluated, budgeted for, and responsive to the growing needs and vision of the County and its citizens.

THE ROLE OF ADMINISTRATION

Administration brings technical skills and institutional knowledge to the decision-making process. In the realm of public participation, administration is responsible for:

- Identifying issues that may need participation and having respect for Council direction and priorities, using the Public Participation and Engagement Matrix (PPEM) to identify public participation and engagement opportunities;
- Identify placement of public participation and engagement within any Request for Proposal (RFP) that would suggest the project may or will require some scope of public participation;
- Assessing through the PPEM the scope of the issue, project or activity; what question (s) is being asked that would require public input and/or involvement;
- Assessing through the PPEM, whether the County will Inform, Consult, Involve or Collaborate with the public;

- Determining the tools and techniques required to conduct public participation and engagement in the most efficient way for all parties;
- Documenting, reviewing and storing data received;
- Presenting to Council public concerns, priorities and expectations;
- Provide opportunities and alternatives to address and/or mitigate public concerns
- Increase understanding and awareness of both Council and the Public on the issue;

THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC

The citizens and tax payers of the County of Northern Lights have the right to be aware of, informed, consulted, and engaged in decisions that affect them and are:

- Encouraged to become familiar with County information tools such as: the local newspaper, monthly newsletter, websites, Facebook page, and Twitter feed;
- Encouraged to attend public events where meaningful engagement is supported so their voices strengthen decisions and their involvement helps build a stronger, and more resilient community;
- Encouraged to increase their knowledge and understanding of local issues, to get involved, volunteer and be an active participant in the decision-making processes of the County.

IV. PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

Three key factors will be considered before participation and engagement procedures begin:

1. Initiative: the project or decision-making scope, complexity, profile, concern, impact
2. Decision: nature and timing
3. Citizens: number, degree of interest, geographical location, direct or indirect impact

The County of Northern Lights **WILL** develop and follow through on a Public Participation and Engagement level when:

- It is legislated; and
- When Council requests it.

The County of Northern Lights **MAY** develop and follow through on a Public Participation and Engagement level when:

- New programs or services are being established;
- Existing programs or services are being reviewed/modified;
- Identifying Council Priorities and Strategic Issues;
- Citizens quality of life may be directly and /or critically affected;
- There are strong emotional, and or political views on an issue.

The County of Northern Lights **WILL NOT** develop and follow through on a Public Participation and Engagement level when:

- The decision has already been made;

- The project or issue-related decision has already been made;
- The issue relates to the development of an administrative policy that doesn't require or involve public consultation; and issues largely viewed as 'Directive Decisions'; and when
- Stakeholders input will not be considered.

Policy Note: Community participation and engagement does not replace the final power of the decision-makers, but is invaluable in the way it enhances Council's capacity to make well-informed decisions on behalf of the community.

This looks like:

GRADUATING LEVELS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION & ENGAGEMENT					
	INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION OBJECTIVE	To provide balanced & objective information	To obtain feedback on alternatives/ strategies/ decisions	To work directly with the public throughout the process to listen & learn & use input	To partner with the public, developing alternatives & identifying preferred solutions	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, we will listen & acknowledge feedback	We will work with you to address concerns & share how they influenced the decision (2-way)	We will connect with the public & incorporate advice & recommendations into the solutions & decisions.	Public accepts the challenge and makes grass-root decisions with and for the public.
EXAMPLE	Newsletter	Surveys	Public meeting (ratepayer)	Advisory Committees	Recreation Boards

V. POLICY EXPECTATIONS

1. Legislative and Policy Implications

- (a) All Public Participation and Engagement will be undertaken in accordance with the *Municipal Government Act*, the *Freedom of Information and Protection Act* and any other applicable legislation.
- (b) All Public Participation and Engagement will be undertaken in accordance with all existing County of Northern Lights policies.
- (c) This policy shall be available for public inspection and, may be posted to the County of Northern Lights website.

2. Public Participation and Engagement Foundations

- (a) Public Participation and Engagement will be conducted in a sustainable and inclusive manner having regard to different levels of accessibility.

- (b) Public Participation and Engagement activities will be conducted in a professional and respectful manner.
- (c) Public Participation and Engagement participants will be required to be respectful and constructive in their participation. Participants who are disrespectful, inappropriate or offensive, as determined by the Facilitator or Administration, may be excluded from Public Participation opportunities.
- (d) The results of Public Participation and Engagement will be made available to Council and Participants in a timely manner in accordance with this policy and its supporting framework.

VI. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

- 1. Will follow the process set out in the Public Participation and Engagement Framework and follow the seven-step process in the Public Participation and Engagement Matrix (PPEM) and the attached Schedules.
- 2. The PPEM Matrix and Schedules can be updated as required by motion of Council.

VII. MEASUREMENT AND/OR EVALUATION OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT

The County of Northern Lights is committed to monitoring and reviewing the framework, and measuring the success of community engagement activities. We want to ensure citizens time, attention and contribution are valued and utilized during the process. We are committed to staying accountable and transparent to our County community and; investing in a Continuum of Engagement where we learn from each experience, improve and build community capacity.

- 1. The Public Participation and Engagement Framework and Matrix will be reviewed every four years to ensure relevance and effectiveness.
- 2. The Evaluations conducted as part of STEP 7 of the Public Participation and Engagement Matrix will be retained and reviewed to assist in any future changes.
- 3. The effectiveness of the Framework will be measured by the degree to which it leads to more informed decisions (policies, strategies, budget, direction and projects).
- 4. The Policy will be reviewed and evaluated once every four years.