

Citizen Engagement and Public Relations Strategic Plan

A living document designed to forge a new and inclusive path for citizen participation in the governance process in Cumberland County Municipality

5/18/2012

Municipality of the County of Cumberland

Citizen Engagement and Public Relations Strategic Planning Committee

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Cumberland County is a forward-thinking municipality offering a vibrant, safe and healthy rural quality of life for all ages. Our natural beauty and assets appeal to a global audience and are the foundation for our economy and culture. Our communities collaborate to provide quality and accessible services, and positive and creative leadership toward the sustainability of the whole municipality.

-Vision Statement of Cumberland County's Integrated Community Sustainability Plan

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Executive Summary

This document is a compilation of several months of work completed by the Cumberland County Citizen Engagement Committee, created to address the “Citizen Engagement and Public Relations” facet of the Municipality of Cumberland County’s Strategic Plan.

It was decided that the processes regarding the municipality’s interactions and engagement with its citizens need to be re-examined and improved, and the following questions emerged;

1. What methods of communication does the Municipality of Cumberland County use to get municipal information to the public?
2. What processes does the Municipality of Cumberland County follow to gather information from its citizens?
3. How does Cumberland County Council use the information they have gathered to complement decision making processes?

Each objective has been examined in detail and suggestions have been offered as to how to proceed with the completion of each.

This document does not profess to be wholly comprehensive, but compiles the opinions and ideas of a group of politically engaged and civic minded people from various geographic areas of Cumberland County. The Committee was not only diverse in geography, but also in age, gender, career background, and experience. This Committee worked with diligence to offer their thoughts as to where Cumberland County could improve in regard to citizen engagement and suggested solutions as to how to improve in this area.

It should be noted that the Committee has aimed to be as inclusive as possible in this document, and has taken into consideration citizens of all different gender, race, age, ethnicity, geography, ability, education level, and access to resources when devising engagement strategies. The committee believes in the core values of fairness, equality, and respect for all people residing in the County and have tried to reflect these values in this document.

General Overview

What is a Strategic Plan?

Strategic planning is a practice whereby an organization undertakes a process of defining its strategy and direction, while formulating a long-term vision as to the appropriation of an organization's resources.

Undertaking a strategic plan is done with the intention to shape the organization as a whole and will result in a pointed, obvious, overarching goal in an organization, as well as signify a culture shift as core values become more clearly defined.

Having a strategic plan prevents piecemeal expenditure of money and energy, and ensures that a defined vision supports all decisions and actions made in an organization. A strategic plan tends toward the achievement of a lasting goal in the organization, whether tangible or intangible, and lays out the mechanisms to achieve it. A strategic plan should be a roadmap with a destination and clearly defined route to reach it.

An important part of a strategic plan beyond simply defining an end goal is also identifying the following questions;

- How the goal is going to be accomplished?
- How we will know and measure when we have been successful in achieving our goal?

Both of these questions can be answered by an implementation plan. A detailed implementation plan includes a list of activities, costs, expected difficulties, and schedules that are required to achieve the objectives of the strategic plan. The attached appendices will serve as implementation plan for the suggestions outlined in this document.

Strategic Planning in Cumberland County

In 2009 the Municipality of Cumberland initiated a strategic planning process via a workshop with Council and a broad cross-section of staff. It resulted in a productive overview and examination of the values and mission of the Municipality. It was agreed at this time that the process would be put on hold until the completion of the County's Integrated Community Sustainability Plan, a study that was mandated by the Province of Nova Scotia in 2009 to be completed by all municipalities. This wait period was intended to avoid duplication of effort between the Integrated Sustainability Community Plan and the Strategic Planning process. It was felt that the two documents should be married and work as a single living document due to their similarity and importance to the long-term strategy of the County.

Another strategic planning workshop was held the following year in 2010 after the completion and acceptance of the Cumberland County Integrated Community Sustainability Plan. It was through this process that the following six priorities were identified and discussed;

1. Citizen Engagement and Public Relations
2. Depopulation and Aging Demographics
3. Improving the Health and Wellbeing of Citizens
4. Municipal Financial Sustainability
5. Climate Change Mitigation and Adaptation
6. Good Stewardship of our Environment and Resources

Action Teams were formed, and in the summer of 2011 it was decided that it would be most productive to only initiate the process for two of the priorities at one time. Following this decision, the “Citizen Engagement and Public Relations” as well as the “Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation” Action Teams were assembled and set to work.

Focus: Citizen Engagement and Public Relations

Overarching goal of the Citizen Engagement Committee

The aim of the Citizen Engagement Committee was to develop a strategic plan aimed to set measurable goals for marked and regular improvement in the area of citizen engagement and public relations in Cumberland County.

Committee Overview

The Committee originally consisted of two Councillors and four staff. The County then advertised for citizen members with the intention of selecting three or four to sit on the Committee. Seven applications were received from all different areas of the County, and it was decided that all applicants would be offered a chance to participate on the Committee as they almost perfectly reflected the diverse geographic spread of communities in the area.

The Committee currently consists of the Solid Waste and By-Law Administrator, the Municipal Clerk, the Municipal Intern, the District 10 councillor, the District 5 councillor, and one citizen member from the communities of Advocate, River Hebert/Joggins, Malagash, Amherst Area, the Northumberland Shore, Rodney, and Wentworth.

The Committee was diverse in gender (four female, eight male), age (early twenties to seventies), geography, career background, and educational experience.

The Committee met a total of seven times for approximately two hours. There were also several side meetings held by staff members of the Committee to work on the development of recommendations and the formatting of the document. Each meeting held was a positive step forward to a more well-rounded and comprehensive document.

Current Situation

Citizen engagement was chosen as one of the Strategic Priorities of the County because Council and Staff recognize the need for an informed and involved citizenry in order to be an effective and accountable organization.

The Committee had several in-depth discussions about the problems currently faced by the Municipality in the area of citizen engagement. The Committee identified a need for better communication from the County on a regular basis regarding debate and decision making in Council meetings. The committee noted that it can be difficult to obtain information about Council sessions from the website, and that the

County has not yet capitalized on newer and more current forms of advertising and communication like social media.

The Committee also recognized the need for an improved process for communications about special issues, like by-law changes and budget discussions, which are separate from everyday regular communication. It was noted that when larger Council issues arise, citizens may feel as if they have not been adequately consulted or given enough opportunity to present their feedback or opinion on the issue at hand. This may lead to a negative reaction when the public realize an important debate has been had that they may have liked to contribute to, especially regarding more “hot-topic” things like wind turbine setbacks or solid waste. Certain procedures around customer service and public consultation need to be created and enforced to remedy this. The Committee noted that citizens should be approached for their input *before*, not after, decisions are made.

It is generally seen in citizen engagement research that an uninformed populace will remain largely satisfied, and the public generally only becomes involved when something threatens the status quo or an issue arises that is of great interest to a certain group of people. If it is the mission of the Municipality through this strategic plan to help Council become more accountable, it must fully commit to informing the public but also be willing to receive and consider feedback from them as well. The committee noted that there is little point to collecting feedback from the public if it is not considered and acknowledged, regardless of what Council decides as a final decision. This process has revealed the fact that the Municipality would benefit from greater “social capital” (positive relationships with productive benefits), and would do well to use engagement strategies to increase its cooperation with not just its citizens but also other important community groups and organizations in the County.

Moving Forward

The Committee suggests that the Municipality implement, within reasonable expenditure of resources, the recommendations set forth in the following sections to ensure that staff and Council begin to value citizen engagement and public relations as a top organizational priority in the Municipality of Cumberland. This strategic plan is intended to be used over the next five to ten years as a long-term reference point for Council and staff of the Municipality, and the Committee firmly believes that, if followed diligently, this plan will result in participation of citizens becoming more substantial and meaningful, and that Council will have a regularized process for considering citizen feedback and use it as an important addition to their decision making processes.

Citizen Engagement and Public Relations Strategic Plan Objectives

In the preceding section, the problems that face the County in regard to citizen engagement and public relations were identified. Thus the Committee met several times to determine potential objectives that Cumberland County will strive toward in order to solve these problems.

In achieving these objectives, the County will strive to make citizen engagement a primary part of the **culture** of the organization.

After some discussion and working backwards from some of the specific tactics the committee identified as ways to increase citizen participation in municipal affairs, three priorities were identified that will henceforth be considered **the objectives of this strategic plan**.

Objectives of the Cumberland County Citizen Engagement and Public Relations Strategic Plan

1. Getting information OUT

Create an informed citizenry, staff and Council.

2. Taking information IN

Ensure the Municipality receives input from a broad section of the public on a regular and issue specific basis by providing and encouraging the use of a variety of communication tools.

3. USING this information

Collaborate with and empower citizens by ensuring their feedback is taken into serious consideration when decisions are made and by acknowledging their input.

It is the intention of the committee to see that Cumberland County Council follow through with meaningful initiatives to help achieve these objectives and that marked improvement in citizen engagement and relations in the County will be obvious in the months and years to come.

1. Getting information OUT

Create an informed citizenry, staff and Council

The first step to an engaged citizenry is to actively provide the public with municipal information and to ensure information regarding services and initiatives is readily accessible if citizens wish to find it.

The accomplishment of this objective would see citizens become more aware of things like;

- How tax dollars are spent
- Initiatives of the Municipality
- Upcoming changes in by-laws
- Meetings of Council
- Opportunities to become involved
- Processes by which to run for Council
- Processes by which to present to Council
- Avenues by which to receive funding

The goal of creating an informed citizenry is to encourage the public to become a real and effectual part of the process of deliberation when Council makes decisions, which can only become reality when people have information and are inspired to become involved.

By virtue of their position as elected officials, Councillors have the opportunity to reach lots of people and encourage citizens to become involved in municipal initiatives. In addition to representing their districts, Councillors can provide information to residents, gather input, and bring it back to Council.

Staff must be aware that citizen engagement is essential to the workings of the Municipality and that they are there to serve the public. Theoretically, the public will be much easier to work with and more receptive to paying taxes when they understand the workings of the Municipality and how their tax-dollars are spent.

Customer service must be a part of the organization's culture as opposed to just something to be done on an as-needed basis. Staff must be pro-active in providing information to citizens and Council on an internal and external basis. More information provided to the public could lessen redundancy in questions from the public and encourage more pointed and productive dialogue between the County and its residents.

If achieved, what would this look like?

- Better voter turnout to municipal elections
- More people will know what is going on in the County and be more "municipally aware"
- Major issues at the County level will be adequately and sufficiently advertised using a "Communications Plan"

Recommended Activity

1. Develop a Communication Protocol/Policy for internal and external communication

Even without someone or several people to “champion” efforts toward communications, a policy would help to enforce certain standards within the organization, so long as it was enforced consistently.

This should include:

- media release templates
- standardized signatures/headings/email formals/memos, etc.
 - some mention of communicating with the media/using social media

2. Create a Social Media Policy for County use of Twitter and Facebook

3. Create accounts on several different Social Media platforms which are regularly maintained and monitored and begin using them as soon as possible to communicate with the public

4. Require all councillors and staff to use email in an effective manner, using the standards and procedures set out in the Municipality’s E-Charter, as part of a “Communications Policy”

5. Strongly suggest that all councillors engage in a social media platform on some level in order to increase their contact with constituents and accessibility

6. Create a regular County newsletter for quarterly distribution

- Delivered to all areas of the county
- Promotion of the positive things that the county staff/council does
- Contains different content from Recreation Newsletter

Newsletter could advertise a variety of things;

- Upcoming elections or by-elections
- Building code changes
- Surveys/comment cards
- Committees of Council citizen appointees, FAQ’s/Ask the County
- Strategic planning milestones
- Budget discussion/advertising
- Breakdown of tax dollars (charts/pictures/graphs), Volunteer recognition
- County Council events/ issues
- Grant money advertisements (which organizations got grants and for what purpose)

7. Ensure better website maintenance, organization, and design in order to make it more effective as a tool for providing municipal information.

The website needs to be written and designed so that it is easy to understand from a citizen point of view and so that information is easier to find.

8. Implement a plan for better use of Traditional Media: Radio, TV, Newspaper

Ideas include:

- weekly newspaper column on County business
- weekly radio question and answer
- Enhance duties of Community Relations Position

9. Provide public access to Council agendas prior to the meetings

If possible within the rules of the MGA, a moderated form of the agenda for the upcoming council session (excluding unapproved minutes) will be made available to the public so that anyone interested in attending the meeting is aware of what is going to be discussed.

10. Conduct an “Open House” at the County for the public

The municipality will host an annual open house day for school groups and the public to come into the office and do tours of the building so that people can gain a general awareness of the departments and workings of the building, etc. Fire Protection Services, RCMP, Libraries, Solid Waste, etc. could be included.

11. Hold an interactive school session with kids in order to inform them of the role of municipal government

The municipality will consider sending a staff person and councillor to conduct an **interactive** session with students explaining what municipal governments are and what they do, especially Cumberland County. Partnership may be sought from the towns in the County.

12. Increase the accessibility of Council sessions for the general public

- Videotape/Record Council and upload on website or broadcast on television for viewing (if possible on website, recording could be broken down by agenda item)
- Travelling Council: Hold Council sessions in different areas of the County on a semi-regular basis (this would be good for receiving information from other communities as well)
- Stream Council sessions online
- Change the time of Council meetings on various occasions, hold them in the evening, on a weekend, etc.

13. Promote Committee of the Whole as a good way for citizens to hear Councillor discussions and understand the thought process behind certain decisions

Explaining the different types of Council sessions and their level of formality may increase attendance at one type or another.

2. Taking Information IN

Involve citizens in decision making processes by giving them ample opportunity to provide meaningful, broad-based input.

If the Municipality wishes to engage people, it must ensure that each time a citizen interacts with any staff member or Councillor that it be a positive experience. Customer service is important in making people feel as if they are being listened to and treated fairly as a resident when they approach the organization. These interactions include anything from applying for a building permit to offering feedback on a proposed by-law amendment.

While it's imperative that the County be receptive when people contact the office, it is also necessary for the Municipality to take certain issues to the residents in a proactive fashion in order to garner feedback and input. In this respect, it is the responsibility of the County to have a formalized and comprehensive process for consulting the public on a regular and issue-specific basis, and needs to do more to seek the overall opinion of residents before important decisions are made.

This objective attempts to better organize how the county collects and organizes information from the public, and looks to build on the first objective which aims to ensure that input received from the public is informed and meaningful.

If achieved, what would this look like?

- People would be more satisfied with customer service when they visit or contact the Municipality and this would be measured via customer service surveys, comment cards, a reduction in complaints, etc.
- Councillors would be more proactive in seeking information from their constituents, and in turn, constituents would become more familiar with their councillors and more willing to provide input
- There would be consistency in how the Municipality conducts itself in its consultation procedures with the public, and there would be a noticeable improvement in the way information is gathered and interpreted via public meetings
- Council decisions would ultimately be more informed, as they would have considered public input that had been organized and presented to them by staff after it had been received/sought using an effective process
- Each person who chooses to become involved in some way, shape or form would get recognition for their contribution and assurance that their voice will be heard when Council makes a final decision
- Citizens would have real and tangible influence over policy discussion

Recommended Activity
<p>1. Individual District meetings with Councillors</p> <p>Each Councillor should be required/encouraged to hold a certain number of “District Meetings” per year in their communities in order to update their constituents as to what is going on as well as receive comments, feedback, and answer questions. These would have to happen frequently enough that the Councillors stay engaged and in the public eye, but not so often as to cause redundancy. It is recommended that a staff person also attend these meetings to help answer some questions. It is imperative that these are conducted correctly so as not to create an atmosphere of lecturing on the part of the Councillor or interrogation on the part of the citizens. It should be conducted more as a conversation.</p>
<p>2. Continue with Customer Service Initiatives that are currently underway in the Municipality in order to improve the quality of interaction that staff of the Municipality have with the public, both in a personal, telephone, and online setting</p>
<p>3. Rejuvenate Committees of Council citizen appointees (hold public meeting explaining process, advertise better) according to Section 26 of the Nova Scotia Municipal Government Act</p>
<p>4. Draft a Public Consultation Policy/Procedure</p> <p>Draft a policy/procedure that outlines procedure around:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - mandating how/when to advertise for public meetings and mandatory best practices (website, posters, social media, traditional media, etc.) - Ensuring adequate follow through for public participation and ensuring that the process is a two-way street (i.e. sending response letters to people who take the time to express their opinion on certain issues) - regulating how public sessions and open houses are conducted, and ensure best practices are being followed by staff when they conduct them.
<p>5. Implement the use of various survey tools to gauge public feedback (i.e. City of Fredericton sidewalk initiative)</p> <p>Online surveys can be done for free, and easy way to gain a relatively good sample of feedback from constituents without going to the trouble and effort it takes to hold a meeting</p>
<p>6. Examine the policy surrounding the Proceedings of Council and determine how the proceedings may affect the involvement of citizens and the ability for people to have a voice</p> <p>People may be more likely to take the time to come to Council if there is a certain procedure for public involvement</p>
<p>7. Create focus groups on certain issues to gauge public feedback and knowledge from experts in the community</p>
<p>8. Cumberland County Council should send a Resolution to the Union of Nova Scotia Municipalities, to be forwarded to the Nova Scotia Department of Education, addressing the lack of an adequate education about “Municipal Government” in the P-12 school curriculum in Nova Scotia</p>

3. USING Information from the Public

Collaborate with and empower citizens by ensuring their feedback is taken into serious consideration when decisions are made and acknowledging their contribution.

This objective aims to make proper and productive use of the information that has been sought or received by the Municipality by a more informed and knowledgeable public.

Once people have chosen to participate by offering their feedback, the Municipality must ensure that those who have contributed are not only recognized and thanked for their efforts, but that their input has been managed and organized and finally presented to Council for their consideration.

This ensures a number of things;

- The public will have been not only consulted, but have had their feedback valued and considered
- The public will know that their contribution was worthwhile and will be encouraged to stay involved and participate again as their efforts have been considered and made a difference
- Citizens will be empowered in the decision making process

Fulfilling this objective will remedy the feeling of powerlessness that can plague the engagement process, and will ensure that no one feels as though becoming involved in Municipal processes or issues was wasted time.

Recommended Action
1. Guarantee that every person who provides feedback to the municipality regarding any municipal issue is responded to and acknowledged for their comments and participation
2. Ensure that when by-law amendments are being proposed that there is one Public Council Session between First Reading and Second Reading wherein Council has the opportunity to consider and acknowledge public feedback, whether in the form of letter, email, phone comments, physical comment, etc.
This may need to be addressed in the policy regarding how the Municipality adopts and amends by-laws.
3. Ensure that all feedback received on a certain issue is compiled, organized and presented to Council before discussion is held on a topic.
The Committee felt that this can be done adequately through the discretion of staff and Council gauging what and how public feedback should be included in the Council Agenda in the “Correspondence” section. The intention is to identify common problems and opinions so they can be considered by Council. A collation of such feedback would be helpful in Council’s decision making processes.

4. Ensure citizen members of Committees of Council are properly recognized for their contribution

5. Involve citizens in public projects through “Standing, Special, or Advisory Committees” as described in Section 24 of the Municipal Government Act.

Create “Special Issue” Committees that citizens can become involved with in order to offer suggestions into a process or project. The Citizen Engagement Committee expects that these would only need to be formed two to three times a year, for especially large or contentious decisions being decided by Council. Examples could include “Solid Waste Communications Committee” or “Wind Turbine Research Committee”, etc.

These Committees would need a specific and strict Terms of Reference, defining things like;

- who would sit on the committee (government, industry, citizen groups, experts, etc.)
- mandate/goal of the committee
- number of meetings that would be held
- timeframe in which to complete work
- whether or not a recommendation to Council would be produced or simply a summation of various group’s opinions and thoughts on the issue at hand for Council to be aware of and consider
- whether or not consensus would be needed for a final decision, if one is necessary

6. Assign a staff person(s) to specifically deal with issues of communication and to be responsible for the execution and implementation of this strategic plan.

The committee feels that someone or several people need to be “champions” of communication initiatives and be the driving force behind these projects. Whether responsibilities are split up, or communication responsibilities are made a bigger part of one person’s job description, someone has to take initiative and be responsible for organizing communications or none of the recommendations will be implemented and the process will not be followed through to completion.

Responsibilities include:

- media releases
- drafting speeches for the Warden/Deputy Warden
- Website maintenance
- Newsletter
- Organizing public meetings
- Developing consultation procedures
- Heading up consultation processes in the county
- Implementing/enforcing communications strategy
- Publicizing council days and agendas, organizing “travelling council”, etc.

Measuring Success

In the creation of this document, the Committee has endeavoured to create an overarching strategy that includes suggestions specific enough to have a tangible and noticeable impact on citizen engagement in Cumberland County.

The Committee recognizes the inherent challenges of measuring the success of some of these measures, as evaluating citizen engagement is a much more qualitative endeavour than measuring something like the issuance of building permits or calculating tax assessments.

Only when citizens have chosen to become more informed, and have used this knowledge to participate meaningfully will citizens be more engaged. And there is little point to having an actively engaged citizenry if Council does not have the mechanisms to consider or process the opinions and contributions of a more engaged population.

The Committee proposes an six-month review of this process, which entails having staff keep detailed records as to which recommendations they have implemented, the process they followed, and the results they have seen. The CAO will be ultimately responsible for ensuring that a follow-up meeting has been held and that staff has presented the proper documentation of the progress. The CAO should be fully involved and present at this meeting.

Every six months the committee will reconvene to be updated on the process.

2012	Adoption of Plan (June)	1 st Review: Thursday, December 6 th
2013	2 nd Review: Thursday, June 6 th	3 rd Review: Thursday, December 5 th
2014	5 th Review: Thursday, June 5 th	6 th Review: Thursday, December 4 th

The Committee suggests that Council also be updated immediately following this bi-annual review in a report from staff.

This report should include;

- An analysis of the perceived difference in engagement, if any, from the previous review
- A brief description of which recommendations have been carried out and followed through, and how this has been achieved
- Note any positive or negative results of implementing the recommendations
- An examination of any customer service reports that have been created/compiled
- A list of who is involved in the project at the current time and their responsibilities

Conclusion and Final Note from the Committee

This Committee came together due to a municipal initiative aimed to get more people involved in shaping the decision making and direction of the Municipality of Cumberland County. The members all share a mutual interest in helping others become involved in governance and desire to keep the Municipal Council well informed as to public opinion and accountable to their residents.

As one of six strategic priorities of the Municipality of Cumberland, it is the hope of the Committee that as their recommendations are rolled out that they increase awareness of and participation in the other five strategic priorities, and that the strategic planning process becomes a testing ground for the improvements outlined in this document as more citizens become involved.

The Committee recognizes the challenges inherent in managing communication and flow of information in and out of the Municipal office, however knows that as processes become formalized and more streamlined, the pieces will begin to fall into place. The more that staff and Council embrace citizen engagement as a part of the culture of the organization and value public feedback as vital to the effective workings of the Municipality, the easier it will become to not only use that feedback, but encourage even more people to become involved.

The Municipality of Cumberland is full of untapped human potential and social resources waiting to be drawn upon to positively contribute to the working of municipal governance. It is imperative that Council and staff take the initiative to tap into that resource and wholeheartedly embrace the skills, opinions, ideas and values embodied by the people of Cumberland County in order to ensure that they are governing effectively, efficiently, and to the will of the people.