

BUDGET COMMITTEE - NOVEMBER 10, 2009

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY FOR THE 2010 BUDGET

Recommendation

The Director of Corporate Communications recommends:

That the 2010 Budget communications strategy be approved.

Contribution to Sustainability

Sustainability by definition focuses on the ability to maintain a function over a period of time. Responsible budgeting allocates resources in a responsible way to sustain the City's operations and aspirations, balancing both current and future requirements. The approach to the 2010 operating budget seeks to minimize the current year requirements, while continuing to meet the requirements of the future.

Economic Impact

Advertising and related costs will be funded from the approved 2009 Budget.

Communications Plan

It is important to inform the community on how their tax dollars are managed and the value they receive in return for their property tax dollars. The intent of the 2010 Budget Communications Strategy is to develop specific actions to ensure the results of the 2010 budget process and key messages are spread throughout the community. The 2010 Budget Communications Strategy and actions are detailed within the body of this report

Purpose

The purpose of this report is to inform the Budget Committee about the City's strategy to communicate the 2010 budget and resulting service improvements.

Background - Analysis and Options

Two-way communication is important. We want to hear from our residents and it is important that we communicate the implications of the 2010 budget and the value that the residents receive for their property tax dollars.

Public consultation and input is an important element of the 2010 Budget Process. This effort included early consultation through the online budget forum posted to the City's website in July and the November 16 public Budget Forum. Continuing opportunities for public input will be provided through scheduled public Budget Committee meetings and expanded website content, supported by advertising and media coverage.

The guiding principles and objectives supporting the communications strategy for the 2010 budget process can be summarized as follows:

- Engaging the Public
- Improving Services
- Practicing Sound Financial Management
- Providing Value for Property Tax Dollars

The 2010 Budget - Value for your Property Tax Dollar

The City of Vaughan has been very successful and has one of the lowest property tax rates in the Greater Toronto Area, while providing quality services to its residents. A founding principle of the 2010 budget was to sustain and in a number of instances improve service with a minimum tax increase. The 2010 budget achieves this objective.

Utilizing the guiding principles the **key messaging** for the 2010 Budget are as follows:

1. Service Improvements /Expansions

To support the needs of a growing community, improvements and the expansion of City services have been proposed in several areas:

- Opening North Thornhill Community Centre
- Hiring firefighters for a new Dufferin/Teston Fire Station
- Expanding road repairs throughout Vaughan
- Implementing community environmental strategies through the Green Directions Vaughan
- Creating an economic development strategy
- Consolidating City services for residents in a Gold LEEDS Civic Centre
- Creating jobs through economic stimulus projects

2. Minimal Cost to the Taxpayer

In 2010, the draft operating budget tax increase is thirty-eight dollars (\$38) to the average residential property. Thirty-eight dollars (\$38) a year is the cost to sustain current service levels and the improvements noted above along with a capital program of forty-nine million dollars (\$49m).

3. Sound Financial Management

As a result of sound financial management practices at the City over the years, the economic recession has had a minimal negative impact on the City's budget and therefore the taxpayers of Vaughan. The City of Vaughan has been recognized for its financial management by others, including the Province of Ontario. These management practices have included:

- Cost containment through freezing and trimming selected expenses
- Reviewing and focusing strategic priorities through detailed planning measures
- Engaging the community to ensure resources are applied to community needs
- Detailed review of additional funding requests
- Building reserves to manage cyclical and economic downturns

The City has been able to demonstrate leadership in financial management, resulting in one of the lowest property tax rates in the GTA, while delivering quality services and maintaining a strong financial position.

Communicating Key Budget Messages to the Community

The City will be communicating key messages on the draft budget through various communications vehicles. They will be used to deliver the highlights of the 2010 budget process to residents, businesses and the media. These include:

City website – The City website is the City's primary communications vehicle. As the budget process unfolds *editorials and updates will be added* to keep the public informed. To date, the Online 2010 Budget Forum was posted as a special section accessible from the homepage under Featured Links. It was announced through the media. The section includes an introduction to the budget process; the 2010 Operating Budget & Business Planning Guidelines; information on The Economic Challenge, Operating Budget Timetable, Future Outlook, and Continued Budget Process Improvements; and a user comment feature.

Editorial coverage – Information will be provided to the community to inform them about the draft budget, successes, and developments. The budget process will be featured in several stories for publication, including Council columns in local newspapers. Several updates to the Council Priorities Plan posted to the City website will also cover this topic.

E-newsletter – The corporate e-newsletter list with its current circulation of approximately 6,000 will be used to issue e-blasts or bulletins on budget successes, developments, and announcing the budget forum. E-newsletter content will be provided to Members of Council as possible content for their newsletters.

Media Relations - The media will be informed of the budget forum, and any related events, through media advisories and news releases will be issued for all major milestones of the budget process. Story ideas on the 2010 budget and the City's approach to financial management will be promoted to the media. A special media event will take place with local editors and writers to present the budget and facilitate a question and answer session.

The Budget overview will be presented at a Chamber of Commerce event by the Budget Chair/City Manager to inform and engage Chamber members.

Further Opportunities for Public Input – Throughout the budget process, five scheduled Budget Committee meetings are open to the public. In addition, the City of Vaughan is undertaking a number of strategic initiatives which incorporate significant public engagement. Although separate processes, public feedback obtained at these events will migrate into recommendations and the budget decision-making process.

Final Approval – A Special Council meeting will be scheduled before budget approval to provide the public with a final opportunity to comment on the proposed budget.

Relationship to Vaughan Vision 2020

The 2010 Operating Budget is the process to allocate and approve the resources necessary to continue operations and implement Council's approved plans.

Regional Implications

There are no Regional implications associated with this report.

Conclusion

A comprehensive communications effort is in place to communicate to the public key 2010 budget messages and developments.

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Respectfully submitted,

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