

Calgary



Budget Conversations

A Summary of Citizen Input on The City of Calgary's Budget
and Services

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Introduction

This report incorporates a summary of data and insights, collected over the past year's research, engagement and social media activities, as viewed through the budget and value for tax dollars lens. Previous reports from Research surveys (Citizen Satisfaction, Spring Pulse) and Engagement activities (What We Heard) have been incorporated into this report's findings to provide a more fulsome picture regarding what citizens value, and what factors they hope The City will consider when making budget and service impacting decisions.

In addition, new activities were executed in September and October 2019 to gather and present citizen perspectives through research, engagement, and social media. Statistically representative research measures were utilized alongside social media and engagement input that provided additional context through deeper and more personal conversations. New activities consider the mandate of each input channel to customize different activities to maximize each channel's effectiveness. This approach represents a refinement of previous approaches to budget and engagement data presentation to satisfy a need for deeper insight.

A new approach to summarizing citizen insights

The Citizen Engagement and Insights (CEI) service line plans and executes safe, fair and accessible opportunities for citizens and stakeholders to provide input on City programs and services, and overall quality of life in Calgary. This data is used to create meaningful and actionable insight to inform City decision making, mitigate risks, identify opportunities for continuous improvement and drive accountability and transparency for Calgary's citizens. As part of the One Calgary strategy for CEI, we have committed to providing research and engagement summaries by service, Council Priority and community. This represents a blended research, social media and engagement report from recent conversations with citizens about The City's budget and services.

As demonstrated in the 2019 Citizen Satisfaction Survey, there is growing public interest in topics such as budget, spending, taxes, and economy. To inform annual budget adjustment decisions, CEI has traditionally presented the results of the annual Citizen Satisfaction Survey to provide citizen context and perspectives as an input into that decision making. In response to growing public interest and discussion, CEI has planned and executed a comprehensive strategy, combining research, engagement and social media activities and data to provide Council and Administration with greater clarity into citizen values and the drivers that determine them.

This coordinated approach leverages the strengths of each input channel to maximize the value of insights gleaned from existing data and newly planned activities. While this yielded a number of useful inputs, it is important to acknowledge the following constraints on the findings:

- The municipal budget process is of little interest to citizens, and there are varying levels of understanding regarding how budgets and plans are drafted and executed.
- The operational requirements and investment needed to support individual services is complex, not easily summarized and often interdependent with other services. As a result, it is difficult for citizens to identify opportunities for cost reduction or solutions regarding service investment and delivery strategies.
- With a topic as broad as the overall budget for The City and with each service being in scope, it is difficult to get a meaningful and consistent depth on a topic. The topics that come up most frequently tend to be those that are top of mind, either because of use, priority or media coverage. While direct contact tactics (face to face engagement, focus groups and surveys) are a primary source of data, there is additional input from social media comments and online engagement incorporated in these results.
- In conversations about specific services, citizens struggle to prioritize or rank investment. Although this information will continue to be presented to Council through other reports, this report focuses on the values and drivers behind those discussions.
- The roll-up report contained below is a summary of the broad themes that emerged from each methodology and more details on each methodology is contained below.
- Engagement and research results provide useful insight into the overall sentiment of citizens, but are intended as one input into the decision-making process and need to be considered alongside other important factors.

Methodologies

Research

The primary objective of research is not to be inclusive of all interested parties, but rather to gather information that best represents the larger population objectively and quantifiably.

Market, public opinion, and other social research is a professional discipline that involves the systematic gathering and interpretation of information about individuals, organizations, or products and services. Research uses statistical and analytical methods, techniques and principles of applied social sciences to gain insights. There are strict rules and guidelines for collecting, analyzing and reporting on data and information gathered through the research process.

Research incorporates both quantitative and qualitative methodologies to achieve an accurate representation of the general populace. Research collects quantitative data by telephone, online and in-person surveys, applying strict sampling techniques to ensure that the respondent pool is representative of the larger population. Qualitative research, exploratory and descriptive in nature, is conducted through focus groups and in-depth interviews. It is used most often to explore ideas and topics in detail to provide a depth of understanding not available in quantitative research. Even with qualitative research there are standard methods that include guidelines and constraints on who can participate to ensure that the population is adequately represented. The outputs of qualitative research are descriptive and considered to be directional rather than generalizable to the general population.

The output of Research is a statistically representative reflection of citizen perspectives.

New Activities:

- Survey: To provide greater context and understanding, new questions were added to the 2019 Citizen Satisfaction Survey, focusing on what services and activities citizens find most important, and what services are perceived to be delivering 'good value'. The purpose is to provide greater context on the values, expectations and priorities that drive those perspectives.
- Focus groups: as part of the Citizen Satisfaction survey activities, focus groups have been conducted with a focus on service value perspectives, economic outlook and factors that citizens want Council to consider when making budget decisions.

Engagement

Engagement at The City of Calgary is defined as purposeful dialogue between The City and stakeholders to gather information to influence decision making. The Engage Resource Unit works with project teams at The City to meet project needs and ensure citizens have their say about those projects.

Engagement is a professional discipline that incorporates a variety of methodologies to gather stakeholder's opinions and views on specific issues or topics to provide information for decision making. Engagement often involves two-way dialogue or conversations with the objective of gaining a deeper understanding of the issues.

Unlike Research, Engagement opportunities are inclusive and usually open to all interested parties who would like to have a say about the issue or topic at hand. The nature of these inclusive techniques mean that information collected is directional and, as with qualitative research, cannot be generalized to the larger population.

The outputs of Engagement activities are descriptive and provide a deeper understanding of the views and sentiments of the participants.

New activities:

- Pop-ups: In person pop-ups were conducted in all wards across the city. Conversations were focused on citizen priorities, information preferences and perspectives and the values that drive perceptions of value for taxes.
- Online engagement: the above topics were also presented to citizens through the Citizen Online Engagement Panel.

Social Media

Social media channels were used to share information, interact with citizens and provide information and, through The City's social listening practice, capturing conversations and the general sentiment of conversation.

As citizens increasingly consume, share content and engage with brands online, digital channels are crucial sources of citizen perspectives. Social listening tools assemble information in real time, to analyze and present conclusions about themes and citizen priorities, while still catching individual conversations and unexpected points of view. Citizen sentiment and reactions to content can be captured and considered on a large scale at a low cost.

New activities:

- **Social media scan:** a scan of social media was conducted to identify prevalent and top of mind conversations to analyse underlying themes of perceptions of value.

Findings

The following sections detail the roll-up insights received from citizens across the above methodologies. As mentioned previously and given the breadth of the topic, this represents a wide-range of conversations; results have been analyzed for over-arching themes and directional inputs as few service-specific perspectives or themes were present consistently across all conversations.

Citizens prioritize essential services & the services they use

Citizens see the connection between top-of-mind services and their quality of life

Research and Engagement conversations both revealed that citizens make a strong connection between the overall quality of life they enjoy and the services that The City of Calgary provides with 84% of citizens stating that “The City has some impact or significant impact on my quality of life.”¹ Essential services (e.g. Police, Fire, 911, Water, sewer, and garbage collection), were rated as ‘very important,’ but so were services like parks, pathways, recreation facilities and programs, transit, roads and social programs. In addition, Long-time Calgarians are more likely to believe quality of life has worsened while those who are more recent arrivals are more likely to rate quality of life higher. Those who rate Calgary’s quality of life as ‘good’ have decreased from 75% to 72% from October 2018 and September 2019.²

When asked to think about services The City provides, citizens primarily refer to ‘essential’ services and the services they or a member of their family use

Citizen confidence when discussing City services was stronger for those services that are more high profile or accessed on a regular basis. As City research continues to show, essential services like the Calgary Fire Department and Police Services are highly visible, which increases participant familiarity. Participants also had an easier time talking about the value they place on more familiar services and those services they tend to use the most.

Beyond essential services or services they use, there is little agreement on investment priority, although most services are seen as important

There is no unifying theme to service reduction amidst the conversations we had with citizens. Citizens tend to prioritize ‘essential services’ and services they or members of their households use, although there was, in this round of conversations, an increased desire for investment in social services even if those individuals

¹ Economics Perspective Survey, September 2019

² Ibid

did not expect using those services themselves. This includes interest in supporting services that are perceived to serve the common good, such as subsidizing services for low income residents.

Most believe social services and community services provide 'moderate' value for tax dollars. Many point out that there could always be more social services provided to those in need – hence many believing that only 'moderate' value is being provided.

Citizens express concerns about perceived increases to cost of living. Cost of living and affordability came up frequently in conversations and were often stated along with a desire for The City to ensure its services are delivered as efficiently as possible. In addition, services that are used by a large portion of the population, such as Transit.

Underlying values to service discussions

While there was little overall agreement on which services to increase and which to reduce, common values that underpin individual investment recommendations did emerge.

As part of research and engagement conversations, emphasis was placed on understanding the specific values that drove a citizen to recommend an increase or decrease in a particular service. These values provide an indication of the types of thinking that citizens expect to see present when difficult decisions are made and provide opportunities for future, more detailed conversations.

Citizens have a desire to understand what a service costs and what options were considered to deliver that service more efficiently

While citizen's knowledge of The City's budget and services was relatively low, there was consistently expressed interest to understand the specifics around service costs. This interest increased around the specific services and areas that each citizen was interested in, citizens expressed little interest in understanding the overall budget process. Citizens voiced a desire to know what alternate funding solutions were considered when investing in initiatives and transparency around how decisions were made.

Citizens want to see how The City planned for service implementation and offering

Citizens expressed a desire for strategic prioritization of investment and wanted to know that an underlying planning process had been followed. Many citizens discussed limiting the outward growth of the city or at least slowing down the pace of growth and managing costs through reducing urban sprawl. There is a perception that spending to service the new areas comes at the cost of service reductions to established neighbourhoods.

Concerns were also expressed that The City takes on too many projects or initiatives at one time and as a result does not identify opportunities to reduce costs through strategic investment. In addition, citizens want impacts taken into consideration; as an example, major road construction projects may increase traffic flow and congestion, reducing quality of life of citizens and inhibiting accessibility to retail and service businesses, impacting the local economy.

Citizens place importance on safety and vibrant communities

Safety for families, children and individuals was identified as important to ensuring inclusive, vibrant and strong communities for all Calgarians. Many participants were concerned about undesirable behaviour, such as loitering, drug use and criminal activities and the importance of adequate lighting in public spaces. Citizens also prioritized awareness, education and preventative programs and services.

Citizens also want rules, processes and bylaws to be applied in a consistent, fair and transparent way and with a focus on programs and services that are affordable, inclusive and accessible for all Calgarians.

For most, downtown revitalization receives a 'moderate value' rating for its value for tax dollars; There were conflicting opinions regarding downtown investment as some believe property taxes collected downtown should stay there, others believe that downtown has seen more than its fair share of investment.

Traffic and getting around The City continue to be of concern for citizens

Citizens across the city expressed concerns about roads and infrastructure. Of note, City-operated roads and infrastructure commonly appears at the top of the Issue Agenda in both the annual Citizen Satisfaction and Spring Pulse Citizen Satisfaction surveys. Citizens also expressed concerns about recent Transit changes and service reductions as well as roads maintenance including pot hole repairs. Better understanding the long-term vision and concerns about overall transportation planning were raised frequently in conversations with citizens.

Other considerations when defining service value

While values varied depending on the particular service being discussed, common considerations when defining service value include: affordability, accessibility (location, availability or frequency), ease of use, convenience, consistent level of service, positive customer experience, knowing you have been heard, efficiency, and whether a service is being utilized.

What citizens would like Council to consider when making decisions

Cost of living and the cost of doing business in Calgary

While there were varying views on the topic, cost of living including property taxes and the cost of doing business were front of mind for citizens. Many express negative views about property tax (for residents and businesses) and increases to user fees for City services and programs that maintain or reduce service levels. Conversely, some made comparisons to other cities that they have lived in and say that property taxes in Calgary are not as high as other places and that Calgarians receive more or better services for their tax dollars. There is a concern about high taxes for small businesses and while they are firmly behind support for small businesses, they are worried about a tax shift to residential property taxes.

The business community would like more information from The City relative to budget savings and other important pieces of information tailored to their needs. Many members of the business community have had to reduce their costs to remain in business and not only would like to see The City do the same, but to communicate to businesses about it.

Historically, both citizens and businesses want to see greater efficiency and less time and cost associated with doing business. Many business leaders want to see The City reduce 'red tape' and believe bureaucracy is impeding their business and further business development in Calgary. Citizens would like the business licensing process to be improved and are interested in providing more investment to streamline the process.

Citizens recognize the need for a diversified economy and the value of supporting small business in Calgary. There is a perception that The City 'gets in the way' of business through over-taxation and unnecessarily inhibitive licensing and permit practices.

Citizens want The City to decrease taxes while maintaining service levels and are critical of previous approaches to reductions

Citizens expressed a desire to maintain levels of service while focusing on efficiency to manage costs. Citizens are critical of the perceived approach that budget cuts come at the cost of service delivery, and would like The City to be more effective in managing operations. Although citizens expressed a willingness to accept some service cuts to achieve savings, they also spoke about the personal impacts to cuts to services they or members of their household use.

Investing in 'essentials'

Citizens want investment in the 'essentials' and the services that they or members of their households utilize. They look for cuts to what they perceive to be discretionary spending, and tend to focus on services that are a combination of tax support and user fees funded. Citizens have an interest in investing in services considered to be for the 'common good' but need to see those services being well utilized, expressing a desire to cut services that fewer Calgarians appear to be using. Citizens spoke of reducing 'nice to have' services in favour of maintaining essential services.

Moreover, citizens were likely to rate a service as moderate value if they believed the service was important but could be delivered more efficiently and effectively.

Opportunities for further discussion and information sharing

Through the engagement, research and social media efforts to connect with citizens, themes emerged around additional opportunities for further discussion and information sharing.

Citizen awareness and understanding about The City's Budget and Business Planning process is low

Citizens expressed a desire to participate in specific conversations about services and their budgets—especially regarding those services that are of greater interest to them. Citizens are less interested in better understanding The City's budget process; citizens acknowledge the complexity of managing city budgets and are most interested in the thinking that is applied to making decisions.

Most citizens think The City should do more to inform and involve the public in budget planning

There is a desire for an ongoing and more specific conversation about budget among citizens. They expressed a desire for increased transparency and an easy to find and understand tax breakdown. Better understanding how decisions are made and the rationale behind them was also important.

While there was an increased desire for information, there was no common means by which citizens expect to be kept informed or be engaged.