

**Planning & Development Report to
SPC on Planning and Urban Development
2020 June 03**

**ISC: UNRESTRICTED
PUD2020-0591**

**Administration Follow-up from Stakeholder Panel Discussion on COVID-19
Impacts and Remote Engagement (PUD2020-0522)**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

On 2020 March 15, The City of Calgary declared a State of Local Emergency due to the pandemic spread of the COVID-19 virus. In response, one of the immediate actions was to transition Council and Committee meetings to a virtual platform and allow for any reports due in Q1 and Q2 to be postponed to a later date. A further immediate action that was taken was to suspend all in-person public engagement activities for planning policy initiatives.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Administration has been considering impacts to the City Planning & Policy workplan initiatives and strategizing around an appropriate way forward that continues to allow for meaningful public participation. To help inform Administration's approach, a panel discussion was held at the 2020 May 06 meeting of the Standing Policy Committee (SPC) on Planning and Urban Development (PUD) to discuss the COVID-19 pandemic situation and associated challenges and opportunities with respect to ongoing planning work and public engagement. The panel consisted of nine stakeholder representatives, including members from Administration, Calgary Chapter of the Commercial Real Estate Development Association (NAIOP), the Federation of Calgary Communities, the University of Calgary, the development industry, and community associations.

The panel discussion covered various aspects for consideration with respect to public engagement during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. This feedback, along with other important inputs and considerations, will help to inform Administration's approach for a way forward with ongoing planning work during the pandemic.

ADMINISTRATION RECOMMENDATION:

That the Standing Policy Committee on Planning and Urban Development receive the information contained in this report for the Corporate Record.

PREVIOUS COUNCIL DIRECTION / POLICY

At the 2020 May 06 meeting of the SPC on Planning and Urban Development, Committee received the information provided through verbal item PUD2020-0522, Stakeholder Panel Discussion on COVID-19 Impacts and Remote Engagement. The Committee requested that Administration return with a summary of key findings and next steps.

BACKGROUND

In early 2020, Administration presented the City Planning & Policy service line workplan to Council. This workplan detailed all planning policy initiatives and their anticipated completion dates. Most of these initiatives reflected projects that would require public engagement events and activities.

On 2020 March 15, The City of Calgary declared a state of local emergency due to the pandemic spread of COVID-19. Following this declaration, all Council meetings, including public hearings, were transitioned to a virtual format and all in-person public engagement events were suspended.

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As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the original City Planning & Policy workplan will require adjustments to not only the anticipated timelines, but also with respect to how Administration undertakes public engagement during the pandemic.

To help inform Administration's approach forward during the pandemic, a panel discussion was facilitated at the 2020 May 06 PUD meeting on the topic of COVID-19 Impacts and Remote Engagement. The feedback from this panel discussion, along with other inputs and considerations, will help inform Administration's next steps with respect to remote engagement for our planning initiatives.

INVESTIGATION: ALTERNATIVES AND ANALYSIS

The following section provides a summary of the panel feedback and Administration's initial findings on proceeding with public engagement activities during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Panel Discussion Summary

The purpose of the panel discussion on COVID-19 Impacts and Remote Engagement was three-fold: 1) to bolster Administration's understanding of stakeholders' key concerns with respect to planning work during the pandemic; 2) to better understand the readiness to participate in planning and city-building during the pandemic; and 3) to learn how to apply our findings during the pandemic to inform new ways to foster participation in city building.

The panel consisted of nine representatives from various stakeholder groups and the discussion centred on the challenges and opportunities communities are faced with specific to planning work during the pandemic.

Panel members covered various aspects for consideration with respect to public engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic. The comprehensive What We Heard report from the panel discussion is included as Attachment 1, but overall the key discussion areas are outlined below.

1) Stakeholder's key concerns with respect to planning work during the pandemic

Panelists provided a range of feedback with respect to continuing with engagement during the pandemic, and the main concerns raised for Administration's consideration include the following:

- Barriers and limitations that exist with remote engagement, including access to technology, digital literacy, and ability for meaningful dialogue;
- Questions on the ability for inclusivity and effective participation during a pandemic and through remote activities;
- Concern around the lack of the 'human element' through remote engagement and general agreement that in-person engagement remains a critical aspect to the process; and
- Potential issues around participant confidence and trust, as well as meaningful knowledge sharing and transparency.

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2) Readiness to participate in planning and city building during the pandemic

While the panel discussion did not focus on specific stakeholder groups' readiness to participate in ongoing planning work during the pandemic, nor on specific planning initiatives, there were generally two perspectives discussed on the topic of moving forward with planning work versus ongoing delays:

- One consideration provided was that some stakeholders may not view planning work as a priority at this time, given the personal strains and stressors resulting from the pandemic. Some feedback suggested that public participation may be low, and that trying to engage during this time may be ineffective and insensitive.
- An alternative perspective was provided, suggesting that planning work remains important during this time, particularly in support of the construction industry and the economy. It was also noted that continuing with planning work during the pandemic will help to maintain public interest in significant planning initiatives and help to provide some certainty to communities during this time.

3) How can Administration apply our findings during the pandemic to inform new ways to foster participation in city-building

Administration has developed a working document of Administration's Considerations based on the What We Heard report (Attachment 2) which provides a thorough summary for how Administration is applying our findings to inform new ways to foster public participation. While this work is still underway, some initial ideas that are being explored in how we may adapt public engagement during, and following, the pandemic are as follows:

- Use digital data to create a more inclusive engagement process, assess gaps and inform the messaging to engage with more citizens;
- Explore additional grassroots tactics, such as Conversation Kindlers, which specifically focus on reaching hard-to-reach groups such as youth, low-income, new Canadians, etc. and makes it more appealing to participate;
- Connect with citizens and stakeholders on a broad level to get ideas about where and how outreach could be done differently within planning projects;
- Create an online "Idea Exchange" forum on the Engage portal to enable people to discuss ideas connected Planning & Development engagement. For example, questions could include: "How can we make planning outreach more inclusive?" "What planning topics do students/youth care about and how do they want to get involved?"; and
- Continue discussion with representatives from key stakeholder groups (including those at the SPC on the Planning & Urban Development Committee) about public participation challenges and opportunities.

In general, panelists agreed that online engagement presents many opportunities and may provide for a more inclusive and robust approach to engagement overall.

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Next Steps

As Administration assesses how to proceed with online and physically-distanced engagement on a project-by-project basis during the COVID-19 pandemic, we will continue to apply and adapt best practices for participation and will also work with our individual project stakeholders directly to ensure our engagement is meaningful and suits stakeholder needs. As new engagement strategies are developed, and timelines are refined for individual policy initiatives, Administration will continue to provide updates to the public and Council, where applicable.

One important element of public participation is through the public hearing process at Council. Since the onset of the pandemic, City Clerks has refined the system for virtual public meetings and has hosted four successful virtual public hearings (one of which included an Area Structure Plan) and a number of Committee meetings, including the 2020 May 13 SPC on Community and Protective Services meeting that received over 1,000 public submissions on one particular item and resulted in a two-day session consisting of over 100 members of the public speaking to Committee.

Based on these successes, Administration is confident that effective and meaningful public participation can be achieved through the virtual forum.

Stakeholder Engagement, Research and Communication

In addition to the panel discussion on COVID-19 Impacts and Remote Engagement (What We Heard report, Attachment 1), City-led stakeholder engagement also included a stakeholder survey - the Local Area Plan engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic Targeted Stakeholder Survey - to gauge stakeholder interest and willingness to participate in public engagement during the pandemic. In general, the survey results indicated that stakeholders are interested in continuing with public engagement on active local area plans. The full survey results are included in this report as Attachment 3.

Administration has made updates to the Community Outreach on Planning & Development online toolkit (Calgary.ca/PlanningOutreach), to provide advice to applicants on outreach during the pandemic. Improvements are also being made to the online Development Map, to allow for better information sharing.

Working group meetings involving industry and community stakeholders will continue using remote participation and Administration has also participated in virtual meetings hosted by communities.

Strategic Alignment

A new approach for online public engagement will continue to follow The City policies and principles on engagement and stakeholder input.

Financial Capacity

Current and Future Operating Budget:

There are currently no known impacts to the current or future operating budget. However, as engagement tools become more virtual-dependent, there may be long-term savings in communications and staff overtime. This is yet to be determined.

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Current and Future Capital Budget:

There are no known impacts to the current or future capital budget.

Risk Assessment

There are risks associated both with moving forward with policy initiatives and engagement during the pandemic as well as with suspending policy initiatives until Calgary is in a post-pandemic environment.

Through the panel discussion, there was some feedback that planning initiatives are not a priority for communities during the pandemic, and that stakeholders may not have the capacity to participate in planning projects while managing more personal aspects at this time. There is a risk that if The City moves forward with an engagement strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic that participation rates may be low and therefore not meaningful or effective.

In contrast to this perspective, however, the panel discussion also provided feedback that moving forward with planning initiatives may help to support the economy and construction industry at this time, and that delaying important projects could have the negative impacts of ongoing uncertainty and a loss of momentum and community interest.

Another risk of not moving forward with a new engagement strategy for planning work during the pandemic is that there are many unknowns with respect to a 'post-pandemic' environment. The timing of this is unknown and continues to extend beyond initial projections. Continuing to postpone engagement on planning work until such time that Calgary is 'back to normal' may result in unanticipated and lengthy delays. Furthermore, it is very likely that the environment following the pandemic will reflect a 'new normal' that may be more virtual-dependent and that returning to the past 'normal' will simply not be a viable option. There is a risk that ongoing delays may put The City at a disadvantage in effectively responding to a 'new normal' environment.

REASON(S) FOR RECOMMENDATION(S):

Administration has provided a summary of the Stakeholder Panel Discussion on COVID-19 Impacts and Remote Engagement. This feedback, along with other inputs and considerations, will inform Administration's approach for public engagement during the pandemic.

ATTACHMENT(S)

1. What We Heard report: Stakeholder Panel Discussion on COVID-19 Impacts and Remote Engagement
2. Administration's Considerations based on the What We Heard report
3. Local Area Plan engagement during the COVID-19 Pandemic Targeted Stakeholder Survey Final Results