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A WEEK TO WORK IT OUT

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Abstract: Consultation is a required but, more importantly, a key component of good planning. These processes; however, typically take considerable time. Meetings spread over a year or more are normal. While it is important to take the time to consider issues and determine solutions, we have questioned whether extended lulls between consultation events are truly effective as many participants forget earlier discussions and lose focus on the point of the process as time passes. In response, Stantec has recently developed and applied a “consultation program in a week” approach that we have found effective not only to save time and costs, but also to enhance the quality of engagement. We have used the approach successfully for plan reviews in the Towns of Montague, PE; and St. Alban’s NL; and the Community of Brudenell, PE. The reviews to which we have applied the plan in a week process have been “updates” and opposed to complete overhauls of the planning documents and the communities have also been relatively small so that the issues raised have been manageable. It has been successful in each case. We have dealt with plan reviews quickly and efficiently, which provides value to our clients.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Most provinces and territories require their municipal governments to review community planning documents on a set schedule, generally every five years. As part of the review and update process, public consultation is mandatory to meet legislated requirements. Consultation is more than a requirement, it is the foundation of good planning. Effective consultation requires focus and participation. Planning is fundamentally a democratic process through which community members determine their aspirations and collaborate to identify policies and related measures to achieve their goals.

Consultation processes take time and can be costly. Meetings spread over a year or more is normal. While it is important to take the time to consider issues and determine solutions, do extended lulls between meetings create effective opportunities for participation? The time citizens want to devote to a planning process is limited and as time passes many forget earlier discussions and lose focus on the point of the process. This left us asking, would a compressed consultation timeframe actually enhance participation?

To test our concept, Stantec planners developed and applied a “consultation program in a week” approach. We have applied the process to three plan review processes in Atlantic communities: two in PEI and one in Newfoundland. Each consultation week program is tailored to the community to receive the best input as possible. In each case, Stantec planners concentrated consultation into a single week in which we met with community members, staff, and council. Within this condensed timeframe, we completed critical components of our research; conducted at least two community meetings as well as a meeting with the municipal council; and then developed our project deliverables. As consultants, this also provided us with an intense focus on the community, where we could spend more time immersed in the place and the needs of its residents.

We started each week by identifying planning issues in each community through a tour and interviewing of key stakeholders. This research informed our first consultation meeting with the public at which we presented our take on identified issues to interested citizens. Participants were invited to comment on issues presented and augment our list with issues we had not uncovered.

The second public meeting was designed to be more collaborative. By the time it was held, planners were able to review each issue brought forward during the first meeting and suggest potential solutions for further feedback. Some issues will normally require more extensive discussion to arrive at solutions that work for the community. Following the initial input from community members, draft plan and bylaw amendments are created. A quick feedback loop allows residents to see the results of their input and ideas within days. In general, there are three steps to this approach. These include:

- Step One: Background review of the existing planning documents, available community documents, and discussions with local council and/or staff. Development of a public blog site dedicated to the sharing of information related to the review and update process is also set up to facilitate the consultation program.
- Step Two: Development of community-specific consultation in a week program, incorporating a tour of the community, interviews with key staff and stakeholder, two public meetings, and a presentation to council. Feedback received during the consultation program is reported online using the blog site.
- Step Three: Finalization of the planning documents following receipt of feedback during the community consultation week. The revised plans will then be required to go through council and provincial/territorial approval processes.

Reflecting on our experiences with the three processes, the condensed consultation approach created positive feedback and empowerment within each community. The sustained interaction between the planners and community members built a level of trust and relationship that is important to gaining a complete understanding of the community and the people who live there. The following section provides a project overview for two of these communities in which we have applied the approach, including a description of the community, the review and update process, and the results.

2.0 PROJECT OVERVIEW

2.1 Town of Montague, PE, Official Plan and Bylaw Review

2.1.1 About the Community

The Town of Montague has a population 1,900 and is known as the service centre of Kings County, which covers eastern Prince Edward Island. The town has a strong retail core, and is the site of the regional high school and many regional offices. The scenic Town provides many services to its residents and the population of surrounding areas. Montague is one of several communities that comprise the Three Rivers area. The Three Rivers area takes its name from the Brudenell, Cardigan, and Montague Rivers, which converge and empty into Northumberland Strait. Communities in the area include the Rural Municipality of Brudenell, the Village of Cardigan, and the Towns of Georgetown and Montague.

2.1.2 Review and Update Process

Stantec was engaged to review and update the Town of Montague's Official Plan and Zoning Bylaw. We revised these documents based on review of the 2006 Official Plan and other relevant documents, and a consultation process undertaken in the Town of Montague over three days from March 15 through 17, 2016. At the first public meeting, we summarized the background to the Official Plan and Zoning Bylaw and discussed the issues identified so far after which we encouraged citizens in attendance to share their concerns and ideas. We met with staff to learn about services and infrastructure provided within the town; met with the youth representatives on the Montague High School student council; and talked with several residents to hear their insights and ideas. This input enhanced our understanding of the community and

helped us to develop potential solutions presented for consideration of the public at the second public meeting.

Throughout the project, including the weeks leading up to the consultation week, we shared what we had been learning on the blog site to promote ongoing communication and transparency. The site introduced the project, set out our schedule for the consultation program, and provided project updates. It was viewed 1,135 times by 466 individuals over the course of the plan review process.

Based on our discussions through the consultation program, and input at our two public meetings, several amendments were proposed for approval by Montague Town Council. Following review and approval by the council, we incorporated necessary changes into a revised Official Plan and Zoning Bylaw that was approved by council and submitted to the Province of PEI.

2.2 Town of St. Alban's, NL, Municipal Plan and Development Regulations Review

2.2.1 About the Community

St. Alban's, is a town of 1,233 in the Bay d'Espoir, an inland area off the beautiful Coast of Bays Region on Newfoundland's south coast. St. Alban's provides a variety of services and a comfortable live-work environment. The town's location offers a relaxed rural lifestyle through extensive access to countryside, ocean, and large freshwater ponds and lakes. Overall, St. Alban's has been able to maintain value to its local residents through its abundant natural resources and its success in niche industries. The most prominent industries are hydro generation and aquaculture. The town is home to the largest hydro generating station in Newfoundland. Employment opportunities are commonly found in skilled trades, marine technology science, business, education, health and medical, service industry, and labour.

2.2.2 Review and Update Process

For the St. Alban's Municipal Plan and Development Regulations Update, we worked with the St. Alban's community through an intense consultation week process from April 25 through 27, 2016. During the three days, we toured the town and met several residents with whom we talked about the community. We also met and interviewed Town staff. We conducted two public meetings and two meetings with Council, as well as a final meeting with St. Alban's Town Council.

At the first meeting, we talked about the research that we had completed and what we will learned in St. Alban's immediately before the meeting through our tour of the town and talks with people in the community. At the second session, we summarized our understanding from two days in the community and our presentation focused on changes to both documents to respond the concerns and opportunities we identified in the interest of encouraging feedback from citizens. As we drafted the amendments to the Plan and Regulations the next day, we wanted to know if our ideas were agreeable to the community and whether we might have missed important issues.

Similar to Montague, a blog site was developed for the community and was updated throughout the consultation program. It drew 667 views by 401 visitors during the planning process. By the end of the consultation week, draft amendments were presented to Council. The revised Municipal Plan and Development Regulations that was approved by council and submitted to the Province of NL.

3.0 INNOVATION

The "consultation in a week" approach allows us to test ideas and concepts quickly and employ different formats, venues, and media to gain an understanding of the issues that must be addressed through the proposed review. We have found this approach effective not only to save time and costs, but also to enhance the quality of engagement. The example communities are small and have limited resources. It is a mistake to think that time improves participation. We value the time of participants. Providing a small number of focused sessions in a short timeframe increases profile, and maximizes participant knowledge and oversight. As planners, we are available to go see firsthand the concerns and the opportunities within

the community. Many smaller communities do not have professional planners, so we are available to them to advise on planning concerns.

4.0 LESSONS LEARNED

The condensed consultation processes we have used rely on detailed analysis and careful preparation. A great deal of thinking and analysis is required in the background research and analysis phase before consultation, so meetings are engaging and effective. To succeed with a short consultation process in one pass, planners must provide quality communication and close collaboration with the client. The client needs to be engaged to get the word out and maximize community turnout, because there is no time to build interest. We need clear, informative display materials (maps and panels) and complementary two-way communication. During the consultation programs, we used a blog site to share our views with the community members and respond to their input. This tool was useful to report on our findings and to inform residents who may have been unable to attend meetings. It also allowed participants to track the process from preparation for consultation through to completion of the project outputs, which can be posted on the site following council approval. Other social media tools may also be useful to inform residents, particularly about meeting schedules.

Planners have to be ready for their own intense involvement. It is a busy schedule preparing for and conducting the consultation week. Following the first consultation week, it became apparent that it is important not to 'overbook' the week prior to the consultation program, and to maintain sufficient flexibility in the consultation schedule to be able to adapt if new opportunities for meetings or new issues requiring investigation arise. Once residents are aware you are in the community, one-on-one meetings are often set up to discuss specific concerns. There is also the need to develop presentation and blog content as you go, and continuously check in with the community to make sure their opinions and thoughts are accurately captured.

5.0 CONCLUSIONS

The reviews to which we have applied the Plan in a Week process have been "updates" as opposed to complete overhauls of the planning documents. The communities have also been relatively small so that the issues raised have been manageable. This approach blends traditional engagement with current innovative communication tools, including blogging and social media platforms. It has been successful in each case. We have happy clients. We have dealt with plan reviews quickly and efficiently, which provides value to our clients. The approach is cost-effective. It saves on travel time to distant communities and related costs. It also respects the time available to client representatives, who in some small communities may be part-time employees or modestly compensated councillors. Finally, it ensures community involvement is meaningful and directed to the creation of community planning documents that reflect the views of residents. It is as strenuous for the consultants as it is for the community, but the value is clear in obtaining and applying information at the source.

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