

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT



The Federation of Prince Edward Island Municipalities has prepared a toolkit to help municipalities implement the Municipal Government Act in accordance with the principles of open government – accountability, engagement and transparency. This guide has been prepared to provide Council members with information guidance on public engagement.

Public engagement is a critical part of modern democracy. Engagement provides not only information from citizens that is important to Council, but it also increases public confidence in democratic institutions, and can play an important role in public acceptance of Council decisions. Public engagement can take many forms including public meetings, invited meetings, surveys, social media engagement, referendum, or any other process where two-way engagement is initiated.

Engagement includes accessibility

Accessibility refers to both accommodation for residents with physical challenges, as well as clarity around municipal office operations. Section 85 of the Municipal Government Act contains the following requirements:

- (1) *A council shall,*
 - (a) *by resolution, designate a place in the municipality as its municipal office;*
 - (b) *provide public notice of the location of the municipal office; and*
 - (c) *notify the Minister, in writing, of the civic address of the municipal office.*
- (2) *Within five years after the coming into force of this section, a council shall*
 - (a) *ensure that its municipal office is accessible to all members of the public; and*
 - (b) *establish, publish and maintain a schedule of not less than twenty hours in each week during which the municipal office shall be open to serve the public.*

Public engagement is about communication

Public engagement is a two-way street. It is how Council proactively seeks input directly from citizens and provides a direct opportunity for Council to speak directly to citizens on an issue. Good public engagement leads to better decision-making. It also helps build long-term relationships between Council and citizens.

Any public engagement exercise should have clear objectives in setting up expectations for Council and the public, and the level of engagement. Council must clearly communicate to the

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public as to the expected level of engagement so as not to set up false expectations. The purpose of each public engagement level can be broadly categorized¹:

- **Inform** on issues or decisions;
- **Consult** to gather viewpoints and opinions
- **Involve** to obtain feedback and input on possible solutions
- **Collaborate** to actively work with citizens in developing solutions
- **Empower** to provide citizens with the final decision

What level of engagement is appropriate

Depending on the issue or initiative, the appropriate level of engagement may vary. Limited public engagement may be acceptable when the issue is of limited interest, when there is a clear community consensus, or external factors (privacy, legislative, or otherwise) limit the amount of engagement possible. A higher level of engagement is appropriate where there is widespread interest in the issue, there is no clear consensus, or the issue will have substantial implications on the Municipality.

What is involved with each level of engagement?

Each of the five levels of engagement can be carried out in various ways. But along with each level of engagement is also a commitment to the public and stakeholders.

Informing the public and stakeholders can be accomplished by making minutes of meeting available, by adding content to the municipal website, or through other communications methods. This method is most appropriate for issues that are routine and non-controversial, or for which there is a legal and/or regulatory imperative that compels a directed decision. The commitment is to provide a complete level of information that enables the public and stakeholders to understand the issue and the reason for the decisions made. Council must be prepared to answer questions and further educate residents during this process.

Consulting the public and stakeholders can be achieved through targeted public meetings, seeking input through focus groups, survey and questionnaires, through social media and other electronic forums, or by direct consultations with impacted groups. This is often most appropriate for decisions that mainly impact a focused group, or when special expertise is required. The commitment is to provide the information and context on the issue, and to clearly indicate how the input will affect the issue or decision.

Involving the public and stakeholders is a more extensive process, often with a more extended and varied set of consultations. Although similar methods are used as the consulting process, multiple sessions at various stages of the process, and multiple methods are often used. The

¹ These categories are adapted from the Public Participation Spectrum from the International Association for Public Participation.



commitment is that public input will be sought at various stages, and the impact of that input will be communicated back at each stage.

Collaborating with the public and stakeholders brings others in as a partner in developing options and solutions. This process often involves a more intensive consultative process with facilitated brainstorming and/or option analysis sessions. The commitment is that options and solutions will be developed through the process and not prescribed beforehand, and that the process will be meaningful.

Empowering the public and stakeholders places the final decision-making power with the public. This process often involves techniques such as a binding referendum, and is used when issues have broad public interest, may be divisive or controversial, and/or have major long-term implications. The commitment is that the decisions made will be respected and implemented.

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