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Report 2024-095

Report Title: Northumberland County Communications Master Plan

Committee Name: Corporate Support

Committee Meeting Date: July 30, 2024

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Approved by: Jennifer Moore, CAO

Council Meeting Date: August 14, 2024

Strategic Plan Priorities: Innovate for Service Excellence
 Ignite Economic Opportunity
 Foster a Thriving Community
 Propel Sustainable Growth
 Champion a Vibrant Future

Recommendation

“That the Corporate Support Committee, having considered Report 2024-095 ‘Northumberland County Communications Master Plan’, recommend that County Council approve and adopt this plan at the August 14, 2024 County Council meeting.”

Purpose

To seek Council endorsement of a Communications vision for Northumberland County through approval and adoption of the 10-year Communications Master Plan. This Master Plan is designed to guide the organization’s efforts to build more inclusive and effective public services and greater trust in local government by fostering a community that is informed about County services, and engaged in shaping municipal priorities, policies, and programs.

Background

In 2023, Northumberland County engaged Redbrick Communications for the development of a Communications Master Plan. This plan will guide Northumberland County in the delivery of two-way communications with the residents we serve, over a 10-year period.

It will establish a strategic framework for engaging and exchanging information with the public based on industry (communications) and sector (government) trends, benchmarks, and best

practices; technology and emerging tools; and research into the ways in which target audiences prefer to hear from, and communicate with, their local government, with an action plan to track progress and measure success.

Trends

The field of communications has changed dramatically over the last ten years. Government communicators must be prepared to address trends such as the proliferation of online news and information sources, the decline of traditional newsrooms, advances in digital integration and audience segmentation in marketing practices, and developments in technology. Consistent with these changes, taxpayers today have increased expectations of government around timely access to information, two-way communication, and engagement in decision-making.

Modern communications practices are also required to ensure Northumberland County remains responsive to the community as it grows and changes. Provincial planning forecasts indicate that the local population will grow to 122,000 residents by the year 2051. As noted in the Executive Summary of the Growth Management Report from the County's Official Plan Update process, Northumberland County is located on the Outer Ring of the eastern region of the Greater Golden Horseshoe and is therefore "forecast to experience significant outward growth pressure...largely from the eastern and northern Greater Toronto and Hamilton Area."

Between 2016 and 2051:

- The 75+ age group is forecast to represent the fastest growing population age-group.
- However, the County is also anticipated to accommodate a growing share of young adults and new families seeking competitively priced home ownership and rental opportunities, with growth in this group anticipated to be primarily driven by net migration.

Delivering leading service to increasingly diverse stakeholders will require monitoring of sector and demographic trends, and careful listening to feedback from target audiences about their information needs and preferred channels for engaging with local government, in order to customize outreach plans and ensure content that resonates.

Consultations

From May through December 2023, development of the Communications Master Plan involved research and consultation including:

- Research into global trends and standards, and industry and sector best practices, through organizations such as the UK Government Communications Service (GCS), International Association of Business Communicators (IABC), Canadian Public Relations Society (CPRS), Registered Graphic Designers (RGD), International Association for Public Participation (IAP2), International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC), and studies from organizations such as Edelman and Deloitte.
- A review of County strategies and business plans.
- Interviews with leading and comparator municipalities – five Canadian and one American.
- Interviews with journalists from four local media outlets covering print, radio, and online news.
- Interviews with all members of County Council and the CAO.
- Interviews with all members of the County senior leadership team.

- A survey of 140 County staff across all departments.
- A round-table discussion with community development stakeholders from the fields of manufacturing, agriculture, housing development, workforce development, social services, faith community, training and education, and the non-profit sector.
- Round-table discussions with Communications leads from Northumberland member municipalities.
- Together with member municipalities, a joint survey of community members, with nearly 640 responses.
- Sector insights from Redbrick Communications' 22 years working in the municipal sector.

The findings from this research were consolidated under key themes, analyzed against best practices, and assessed against a communications maturity model for municipalities. This analysis led to the strategic pillars, goals and objectives identified in this Plan.

Risk Considerations

Implementation of the Communications Master Plan is a critical undertaking, positioning the County to:

- Properly anticipate, plan for, and address the changing communication and engagement needs of our community.
- Leverage new technology and practices to deliver meaningful outcomes.
- Build mutually beneficial relationships with key stakeholders that drive trust.
- Establish objective success measures for demonstrating results and value.
- Ensure the Communications Department is positioned with the skills, structure, and training to support the organization over the long-term.

Without a structured long-term plan, these progressive aims are jeopardized, risking inefficiencies, missed opportunities for meaningful community engagement and innovation, and diminished public trust.

Discussion / Options

The development of a Communications Master Plan is identified as a key action under Pillar 1 of Northumberland County's *2023-2027 Community Strategic Plan*. This Plan is based on communications research, trends and current pressures, municipal best practices, and input from internal and external stakeholders.

While it spans a 10-year horizon, the County recognizes the world will not look the same in 2033 as it does today. As such, the plan is a guiding document. The vision and guiding principles identified are intended to root the County's work and give a clear line of sight to strive toward, even when the organization may need to change course and adapt.

Current state

In developing this plan, Northumberland County's corporate communications maturity was assessed using a maturity matrix customized for municipal communications. Maturity models offer a non-biased approach to measuring an organization's current state against a best practice state.

Developed by Redbrick Communications, the Municipal Communications Maturity Index is based on a review of other business and public relations maturity models, communications capability frameworks, and current municipal best practice and trends. It measures five levels of organizational maturity:

1. Side Hustler
2. Doer
3. Ally
4. Strategist
5. Partner

against five capability measures:

1. Organizational structure and competency
2. Strategic business purpose
3. Organizational accountability and processes
4. Operational Investment and Backing
5. Community building, accessibility, and inclusivity.

Based on this index, Northumberland County was rated as a ‘Strategist’.

The assessment revealed that, as an organization, Northumberland County’s approach and understanding of the strategic value Communications can bring to a municipality is progressive and advanced. The Communications team has built strong, highly collaborative relationships across all departments and offers a strategic voice for leadership. The team seeks to deliver the highest value to meet municipal goals and reach target audiences. A more in-depth rationale for this rating is available in the full Master Plan.

In order to continue moving along the index toward the ‘Partner’ level of maturity, building out strategic skillsets toward a more multidisciplinary Communications team, along with standardizing workflow, KPIs and reporting, will further elevate this function. As trust in government declines, the media landscape wanes, and municipal strategies for diversity, equity and inclusion continue to mature, the County will need to continue its work to foster an integrated approach to resident experience, and to demonstrate transparency, accountability and inclusivity to staff and the community. The Municipal Communications Maturity Index provides the County with a roadmap for growth and greater effectiveness based on a model for continuous improvement.

Next steps

Based on research undertaken to develop the Communications Master Plan, three key pillars emerged that represent the target outcomes. These pillars will be the foundational structure upon which next steps and future planning for Northumberland County’s communications and community engagement are built.

- **Pillar 1 – Focus** - A deeper focus on communications across the organization, ensuring greater collaboration and understanding of everyone’s role as an ambassador enhancing resident experience with the County; supporting the Communications team to achieve the highest professional standard and deliver value.

- **Pillar 2 – Partner:** A greater emphasis on partnership building; inviting in, listening to and engaging more audiences in meaningful ways, including staff; involving more voices to share and strengthen County information and value.
- **Pillar 3 – Innovate:** A flexible approach to adapt to changing needs and expectations; establishing new ways to communicate, engage and tell stories; leveraging new tools and approaches to increase reach and engagement; sharing authentic, human stories that resonate.

Fortified by these pillars, an ambitious implementation plan comprised of 7 goals with 44 related action items will be completed by the end of 2027. 18 of these actions were immediately undertaken in 2023 and early 2024 based on initial research, reflecting the five-year scope of this plan.

Financial Impact

In 2023, County Council approved an investment of \$50,000 in the development of the Communications Master Plan, comprising research, community engagement, and plan development. Council further approved \$25,000 annually for 2024 through 2026 to support implementation of measures identified within this plan.

Member Municipality Impacts

The County engaged with member municipalities throughout the development of the Communications Master Plan.

Through round-table discussions, Communications leads from member municipalities shared insights about local trends and observations, current gaps and lessons learned, and best practices. Through this table, the County and member municipalities also collaborated on a joint approach to community consultation. The data gathered through a public survey, promoted by all municipalities, was used to inform this Master Plan. Survey results were also shared with member municipalities to inform lower-tier municipal communications and community engagement strategies and activities.

Going forward, this intermunicipal communications network will establish a formal meeting cycle for continued information-sharing and joint project planning.

Conclusion / Outcomes

The purpose of the 10-year Communications Master Plan – a first of its kind for the County – is to foster a more informed and engaged community, and to elevate the County’s communications efforts for strong, positive municipal storytelling.

The Plan sets a clear vision and mission that will root the municipality over time. The guiding principles will steer the work of the team and ensure all communications and community engagement efforts from the County meet the highest standards of quality and ethics. The three pillars and their corresponding goals and actions establish an efficient structure that reflects what was learned from extensive research, and sets a roadmap for the way ahead.

With clear alignment to the County’s Community Strategic Plan established, it is recommended that the Committee support endorsement of a Communications vision for Northumberland County by recommending County Council’s approval and adoption of the 10-year Communications Master Plan.

Attachments

1. Report 2024-095 ATTACH 1 '10-year Communications Master Plan - Presentation'
2. Report 2024-095 ATTACH 2 'Communications Master Plan 2023 – 2033'