



CITY OF ST. ALBERT ADMINISTRATIVE BACKGROUNDER

TITLE: WORLD CAFÉ DISCUSSION #2 – FINAL REPORT

Council provided the following direction on March 21, 2016:

1. That the Public Consultation Plan - Resident Input into Council's Strategic Direction, as outlined in the Agenda Report dated March 21, 2016, be approved.
2. That Council approve a one-time withdrawal of \$31,000 from the Stabilization Reserve to fund two Community World Cafe public consultation sessions, an online budget survey and a facilitator for the Town Hall meeting.

BACKGROUND:

Banister Research was contracted by the City to facilitate the second World Café style discussion that took place on November 2, 2016.

Administration is directed to prepare a proposed budget based on existing service levels. The Budget Survey, together with the feedback received through two World Cafés, provides Council members with information from residents about their opinions of services and service levels as well as the proposed budget for 2017.

A total of 31 randomly selected and invited residents, of mixed gender and age, attended the second World Café Session to provide their opinions of the proposed budget; priorities for 2017, strengths and weaknesses of the proposed budget, capital projects and comments for consideration for future budgets. Participants were sent proposed budget information ahead of time, giving them opportunity to review documents prior to discussion.

Attached is a summary report from the World Café Discussion.

Attachments:

1. St. Albert November 2nd World Cafe – Final Report.

Report Date: November 28, 2016

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Committee/Department: Strategic Services

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November 2, 2016

World Café Budget Discussion

Final Report

November 18, 2016

Banister
Research & Consulting Inc.

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1.0 PROJECT BACKGROUND

In June, 2016, the City of St. Albert (“the City”; “the Client”) contracted Banister Research & Consulting Inc. (“Banister Research”) to organize a “World Café” style Budget Discussion on November 2nd, 2016. The session would combine elements from a focus group and town hall session to create a fluid and engaging environment in which participants were able to share their thoughts and opinions on the City’s Budget. This discussion involved a top-of-mind discussion of the proposed 2017 Budget, released only days prior on the City website. A total of thirty-one (n=31) residents of mixed gender and age, attended the session on Wednesday, November 2nd, 2016.

This report outlines the findings from the November 2, 2016 World Café Budget Discussion.

2.0 METHODOLOGY

The World Café session is a conversational process based on a set of public involvement principles used to evoke collective intelligence and link these findings to effective action in the pursuit of common aims. The more casual approach allowed participants to share their thoughts and opinions on a broad range of emergent issues in a time period of approximately 2 hours.

The session consisted of two (2) boardroom-style roundtable discussions, with half of the participants assigned to each table. Table assignment was determined by Banister Research prior to the session with the goal of ensuring that each table had a representative mix of participants, according to their age and gender.

A total of four (4) representatives from Banister Research were present for the session: two (2) facilitators and two (2) note-takers; one (1) facilitator and one (1) note-taker were assigned to each table. The Mayor of St. Albert, City administration staff, and City Councillors attended the session. Councillors and administration circulated around the tables to listen to the discussion as well as answer any questions asked of them. Following the discussions, residents were provided the opportunity to interact with City Council on a one-one-one basis. The City of St. Albert was responsible for arranging the facility, as well as providing catering and refreshments for the participants.

For more information on the screening, recruitment, and profile of participants, as well as the script and form design process, please refer to [Section 4.0](#).

Please Note: Readers of this report should be cautioned as to the interpretation of results obtained from the World Café process. World Café sessions provide qualitative data, and, while valuable insights were gained through this process, the results cannot be considered statistically representative. Moreover, the language used in the report is subjective in nature and should be read as indicators of key themes, rather than quantifiable measures. For example, a few respondents would indicate that two (2) or three (3) respondents (per group or overall, depending on the context) responded in a particular way. In contrast, the usage of the words “majority,” “typically,” or “mostly” indicate that approximately three-quarters or more of the participants felt similarly about a topic or theme.

3.0 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

3.1 Budget Strengths: What has the City done well?

Top of mind, most of the participants felt positively about the proposed budget, explaining that the City is maintaining a good balance of “moving forward while budgeting responsibly,” particularly in consideration of the challenging economic climate. Participants also felt that the proposed budget was proactive, in the sense that it was developed with foresight and was exclusive of any “kneejerk reactions.” One participant described the proposed budget as “ambitious,” to which others agreed.

Many felt that the City generally maintains satisfactory service, activity, and program levels, including the maintenance of infrastructure. In particular, participants felt that the Business Cases were “comprehensive,” and were pleased to see that the City plans to invest in jobs and its employees. Specific service areas highlighted by a few participants as budget or City “strengths” included: snow removal; crosswalk markings; and programs and activities for children.

With regards to the 3.1% proposed tax increase, participants admitted they were prepared for it and generally described it as “acceptable,” “reasonable,” and “realistic,” in light of service levels and capital projects. It was also acknowledged that the City put a strong effort into prioritizing throughout the year, in order to mitigate the impending tax increase.

3.2 Budget Weaknesses: What are the areas for improvement?

A few respondents suggested that the 3.1% may not be affordable for low-income families and/or renters (i.e., through rental hikes), which could hamper City growth. Some participants also expressed concerns about the potential “snowballing” of tax increases once borrowed funds and capital projects (pool and Servus Place expansions) are factored in; a few participants expected to see increases of anywhere from 5% to 8% over each of the next 3 years. Additionally, some participants questioned the value of their tax dollar, inquiring as to the corresponding service level changes and how the City of St. Albert compares to other municipalities. Areas in which participants had specific budget or service level concerns included:

- **“Discretionary” Services.** Services perceived to be unnecessary or in excess of current need/demand included: external agencies (unspecified); aerial fire truck (“why do we need another one?”); Founders’ Walk/Musée Héritage Museum; Lacombe Lake Park fencing; ice rinks; covered sand storage (“the City could probably build a structure to cover it”); public transportation (“the user base does not justify the costs”); and painted crosswalks/roundabout.
- **Inefficient Services.** Participants questioned whether the weekly recycling service is necessary, and suggested that a sorting program and/or user-pay model (the UK was cited as an example) would significantly reduce costs. Some participants also had concerns about the environmental-friendliness of the City’s diesel trucks. The efficiency of water and wastewater services was questioned, in terms of whether the City is taking a more reactive (less efficient) or proactive (more efficient) approach with regards to repairs and maintenance.
- **Staff and Service Providers.** Questions arose as to whether there is an excess of compliance staff and whether the City carefully studied the cost-effectiveness of payroll staff vs. contractors.
- **Gaps in Services.** Participants cited social services and issues as an area lacking in the budget (e.g., food bank; families in crisis; youth shelter; homelessness).

- **Potential Duplication of Services.** A few respondents had general concerns about the potential duplication of services, with one participant citing the Community Information and Volunteer Centre (CIVC) “information resource program” as an example (e.g., “CIVC receives money for it, when there are others who offer the same service”).
- **Accuracy of Figures.** A few participants had concerns about the accuracy of some of the information contained within the proposed budget, specifically with regards to the unemployment rate, real property value (“the proposed budget does not account for the devaluation of real estate”), and discrepancies between the proposed budget and previously projected forecasts.
- **Reserve Fund.** A couple of the participants questioned why the City has to borrow funds when there is \$16M in the reserve fund.

Participants also felt some clarification was required about whether capital projects carry debt (“a surplus should pay for capital projects”), and “what kind of growth” is implied under the municipal plan.

3.3 Other Comments

3.3.1 Capital Projects

In general, participants felt that the City should carefully weigh the advantages of capital projects against the budget implications, as many felt that the City should pull back spending on capital projects until the economy recovers and/or plan to complete capital projects when they can be accounted for within a surplus. Conversely, a few participants suggested that capital spending is acceptable when it will stimulate the economy, provided it fits within a balanced budget.

One of the City Councillors posed a specific question with regards to capital projects and the implications on resident taxes extending into 2018 and 2019.

Eight (n=8) participants indicated that they were comfortable with the proposed tax increases to fund the capital projects, while ten (n=10) were not.¹ A few of those who were supportive explained that the library should “realistically” be built, and that all three capital projects (e.g., library, arena, pool/recreation centre) will be necessary in order to keep up with the City’s growth and encourage youth community involvement. Those who were opposed stressed efficiency, fiscal responsibility, and the need to take economic conditions into account. Generally, these participants felt that capital spending should be delayed, or expressed concerns that the tax hike will likely to be higher than anticipated, once other emerging projects are factored in.

¹ The majority of participants did not provide a definitive response.

Particular areas in which participants felt capital spending should not be incurred (similar to those previously stated) included: public library; pool; ice rink; Founder's Walk; "Heritage Park"; 150th Canada Day events; and fencing in Lacombe Park. Finally, some participants also had questions about non-resident use of facilities; and break-even points on capital projects.

3.3.2 Future Budgeting Considerations

In terms of going forward, participants generally felt that the City needs to ensure efficiency and "tighten" spending to minimize future tax increases. While participants acknowledged that increases are expected to maintain service levels and infrastructure, the City needs to ensure a carefully balanced approach, between spending and ensuring affordability for residents, particularly in consideration of the proposed provincial carbon tax and federal taxes. Most importantly, the City needs to have a comprehensive and well-thought out, as opposed to a "piecemeal," or reactive, approach. It is important to residents that the City's vision is communicated regularly.

A couple of the participants felt that the budgeting process is "backwards," in that the City "starts with a number and tries to fill it in, instead of determining what services are necessary" and planning their spending accordingly.

However, it should be noted that participants generally felt that one of the City's strengths is its regular communications and opportunities for public consultation. Participants extended their appreciation for these efforts, and felt it is important that the City continue to engage with its residents, preferably as early in the process as possible so that the opportunity for change in implementation is realistic.

Finally, participants strongly felt that the City needs to ensure it is taking the current and projected (or desired) demographics of the City into account during the budgeting process, such as planned spending to "bring younger people to the community" and "maintain youth stability." The City should also determine what facilities, if any, could be re-purposed to meet residents' needs (e.g., "use empty retail space downtown to kids' programming").

3.4 Priorities for the 2017 Budget

Throughout the discussion, note-takers from Banister Research documented the main themes of the discussion on poster boards; at the end of the evening, participants were invited to identify – from the lists – up to three (3) concerns or priorities they felt Council should keep in mind when finalizing the 2017 Budget. The following were the items most often selected (in order of most to least frequent):

- Increasing municipal efficiency, in general (n=11)²;
- Tightening spending over the next 1 to 2 years given “economic instability” (n=9);
- Ensure operation costs support capital projects (n=9);
- Delaying capital projects (n=8);
- Improving communications to residents of the City vision (n=8);
- Reducing spending on “discretionary” services (n=7);
- Continuing to maintain infrastructure and capital projects (n=7);
- Increasing social supports and services (e.g., Youth, homelessness, women’s shelter, family services) (n=6);
- Continuing to improve City beautification/aesthetics to strengthen the City’s brand and marketing (n=5);
- Determine whether a new library is necessary (n=3);
- Avoiding duplication of services (n=3);
- Assessing transit ridership levels and decrease service levels accordingly (n=2);
- Investing in the library (n=2);
- Incentivizing reduced spending (n=1); and
- Increasing City density (n=1).

3.5 World Café Feedback

At the end of the discussion, participants were invited to submit any final comments and/or feedback for the discussion on handout forms. Overall, participants were grateful for the opportunity to give feedback and interact with the Mayor/City Council, and felt that the discussion was informative. Participants also appreciated having the opportunity to review/read the proposed budget materials in advance of the discussion. A couple of the participants had questions about the feedback loop, in terms of how and what recommendations are provided to Council.

In terms of suggestions for improvement for future discussions, some participants would have liked to go into further detail, in terms of a more specific or direct line of questioning (“the topic was too broad”) or providing responses to “specific dollar figures.” A few respondents felt the groups could be smaller to facilitate greater input from participants, while a couple of respondents felt that the discussion could be longer or conducted over two nights (e.g., with panel participants).

Finally, when asked how likely they were to participate in another World Café discussion, participants were overall very likely, with a mean rating of 8.68 out of 10 (scale: 1 = “not at all likely”; 10 = “very likely”). When asked about their likelihood to recommend a World Café to a friend, participants provided a rating of 8.67 out of 10.

² Number of *times* the item was selected; participants may have selected the same item up to 3 times.

4.0 SCREENING, RECRUITMENT, AND FORM DESIGN

4.1 World Café Participants

During the 2016 Budget Survey, conducted from July to August, 2016, survey respondents were provided the opportunity to sign-up to be notified of future research or public engagement opportunities. The vast majority of the participants for the World Café discussion were recruited from this list of survey respondents, which was supplemented by Banister Research's pre-existing database of residents living in the City of St. Albert.

Participants were screened according to their age and gender, in order to ensure a representative mix of participants. Additional demographic data collected during the screening and recruitment process included: household composition; employment status; length of residence in St. Albert; and classification as a homeowner or renter.

Those who self-identified as any of the following were considered ineligible and were screened out during the recruitment process: current employees of the City of St. Albert; a market research firm, advertising firm, or a media source; and those who currently or have previously served on the St. Albert City Council.

Fifty (n=50) individuals were recruited for the session, of which 38 were confirmed to attend as of November 1st, 2016. Each individual recruited received an e-mail confirmation prior to the session that provided the details of the groups, including time, date, and location; reminder e-mails and/or phone calls were made to all participants the day prior. Ultimately, 31 individuals attended the World Café session on November 2nd, 2016. All participants were offered an honorarium in the form of a \$10 City of St. Albert gift card to a local business, as a "thank you" for participating. The City of St. Albert was responsible for providing the incentive.

The table on the following page demonstrates the demographic profile of those who participated in the World Café Budget Discussion on November 2nd, 2016.

4.2 Script and Form Design

The session was facilitated based on a discussion or moderators' guide, developed prior to the session in conjunction with the City. The guide was designed to gather respondents' top-of-mind opinions regarding the proposed 2017 Budget. In large part, the World Café process is an open-ended interview. While questions were pre-determined, flexibility was allowed during the session to facilitate the probing of unanticipated findings. In this regard, the moderators used the guide to keep participants on track, while still encouraging spontaneous discussion. A copy of the final moderator's guide is available in a separate file.

Participants were provided with a link to the proposed 2017 Budget website³ prior to the discussion, as well as a copy of the St. Albert Gazette October 29th insert.⁴ Participants were encouraged to review the materials in advance of the discussions.

³ <https://stalbert.ca/cosa/finance/business-plans-budget/2017-budget/>

⁴ <https://stalbert.ca/uploads/PDF-reports/Budget2017-GazetteInsert-Proposed-WEB.pdf>

Table 1: Participant Demographics

	Female	Male	Total
Age			
18 to 34 years old	3	1	4
35 to 54 years old	4	10	14
55 years of age or older	6	7	13
Household Composition			
Married/cohabitating with children	4	8	12
Married/cohabitating without children	5	9	14
Single person with children	1	-	1
Single person without children	1	-	1
More than 2 adults	2	1	3
Employment Status			
Employed Full-Time	3	11	14
Employed Part-Time	3	3	6
Retired	5	3	8
Homemaker	2	-	2
Unemployed	-	1	1
Highest Level of Education			
Less than high school	1	-	1
Graduated high school	1	1	2
Some college/technical/vocational schools	-	1	1
Graduated college/technical/vocational school	2	3	5
Some university	1	4	5
Graduated university	8	9	17
Home Ownership			
Own	11	16	27
Rent	2	2	4
Number of Years Living in St. Albert			
3 to 10 years	5	6	11
More than 10 years	8	12	20
Total per Gender	13	18	31