

# Report

Date November 6, 2024  
Subject 2025 Budget Outreach

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File: 0550-20

## PURPOSE

To seek Council direction to conduct broader public engagement as part of the 2025 Budget process by hosting three public open houses and special Committee of the Whole meetings in Chemainus, Crofton and the South End in November and December 2024, as well as other supporting engagement activities in order to allow the general public an opportunity to have their say on project and budgetary priorities.

## BACKGROUND

As part of the annual budget planning process, staff prepare business plans for each municipal department. The business plans outline the key functions of the department, accomplishments in the current year, deliverables for the next year, the anticipated operating budget, and any additional funding requests being sought for the following year (staff, studies, programs, capital projects).

Traditionally, these business plans have been presented at a series of Committee of the Whole meetings held in November and December in the Council Chambers. North Cowichan staff also upload the documents to the digital engagement platform (*Connect North Cowichan*) to solicit feedback on the budget.

Between 2015 and 2020, budget engagement consisted of open houses, surveys, and online information. These engagements elicited low participation numbers (116 surveys for the 2020 budget and 213 participants for 2019). The 2021 and subsequent engagements were initially dictated by pandemic mandates – as well as the need to adopt a recovery budget, with little room to consider input – and as such these moved entirely online and at an ‘inform’ level of engagement. Online visitors were encouraged to participate in business planning and budget meetings and to ask questions on the digital engagement platform.

- 2022: PlaceSpeak page: 195 views, 5 comments
- 2023: 301 project page visitors, 1 question asked
- 2024: 668 project page visitors, 3 questions asked

One of the key goals in Council’s Strategic Plan is *Engagement*, which strives for the municipality to engage the community at large. Now that we have moved past the challenges posed by the pandemic, staff are seeking Council’s interest in meeting with the public in three of our communities (Chemainus, Crofton, South End) to discuss the budget.

## DISCUSSION

In accordance with section 3.1 of Council and Committee Procedure Bylaw No. 3945, *"All meetings must take place within the Municipal Hall except when resolved to hold a meeting elsewhere and notice is given..."*. As such, if Council wishes to proceed, a resolution from Council is required in order to hold Special Committee of the Whole meetings outside of the Municipal Hall.

The format for each meeting would be the same and include the following:

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|-----------------------------|---|
| 4:30 p.m. to 6:00 p.m.      | Open house (display boards, public invited to informally meet with Council and staff to learn about each department's operational plans and discuss budget items).  |
| 6:00 p.m. to 7:00 p.m.      | Committee of the Whole meeting begins and includes formal presentation on the budget process, operational and capital discussion, Council and community priorities. |
| 7:00 p.m. to 7:30/8:00 p.m. | Question period for the public to ask Council and staff questions.  |

Live streaming the Special Committee of the Whole meetings will be problematic because the facilities being proposed are not outfitted with the appropriate technology. Staff intend to record each session via video and upload the video to North Cowichan's digital engagement platform afterwards for on-demand viewing by the public.

*Connect North Cowichan* will also be updated to include all the department business plans and the agenda packages for the Committee of the Whole meetings. The public will be able to take a brief survey regarding their strategic and project priorities and ask questions.

The results of this phase of budget engagement will be summarized for Council and brought forward in January to inform budget deliberations.

## OPTIONS

### 1. (Recommended Option)

THAT Council approves the following 2025 budget engagement and meeting schedule:

- (1) Open House at 4:30 p.m. followed by a Special Committee of the Whole meeting to be held in person at 6:00 p.m. at the Crofton Community Centre, in Crofton BC, on Tuesday, November 26, 2024.
- (2) Open House at 4:30 p.m. followed by a Special Committee of the Whole meeting to be held in person at 6:00 p.m. in the Heritage Hall at the Cowichan Community Centre, Duncan BC, on Tuesday, December 3, 2024.
- (3) Open House at 4:30 p.m. followed by a Special Committee of the Whole meeting to be held in person at 6:00 p.m. at the Chemainus Fire Hall, in Chemainus BC, on Tuesday, December 10, 2024.

AND THAT Council cancels the December 10, 2024 Committee of the Whole meeting scheduled for 5:00 p.m. at Municipal Hall in order to accommodate the 2025 budget engagement and meeting schedule.

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- Staff will provide formal public notice to amend the dates and locations of the existing Committee of the Whole meetings. Social media and newspaper advertisement will be used to notify and invite the community of the upcoming meetings.
  - The format is designed to allow people to meet staff and Councillors face to face. It enables people to attend the open house portion or the presentation component depending on their schedule. It allows people to ask questions that they might not normally ask in a more formal Council environment.
  - Pros: meeting the public in each of their communities provides an opportunity for the municipality to engage on local issues and to have more informal discussions about priorities.
  - Cons: this engagement format takes more staff time and effort to organize and prepare for and the turn out for these events may or may not be different from a traditional Committee of the Whole meeting at the municipal hall.
2. THAT Council direct staff to deliver the business plans according to past practice.
- Under this approach, the existing Committee of the Whole schedule would remain in place. There would be two meetings (November 19 and 26) where staff will present their business plans to Council and there will be a separate meeting to discuss capital projects for 2025 (December 10).
  - Pros: The current practice has been very effective, and staff have prepared to deliver similar materials and presentations. There is little extra work required to continue with the status quo. The *Connect North Cowichan* tool has been a successful way of soliciting input from the public over the past three years.
  - Cons: The current engagement efforts are limited to the public attending a Committee of the Whole meeting or using the online platform which may not engage as many people in the community.
3. THAT Council direct staff to deliver the business plans according to past practice, though with enhanced engagement activities.
- Under this approach, the existing Committee of the Whole schedule would remain in place. There would be two meetings (November 19 and 26) where staff will present their business plans to Council and there will be a separate meeting to discuss capital projects for 2025 (December 10).
  - In addition to the online Q&A, a brief survey could be added that seeks to learn people's strategic and project priorities. A more robust outreach plan, including more social media, e-newsletters, and media, would aim to get more people involved in the business planning and budget process.
  - Pros: The current practice has been very effective, and staff have prepared to deliver similar materials and presentations. The addition of the survey and additional outreach would provide more people an easy opportunity to get involved and share their thoughts, with little additional staff time and resourcing. Online engagement is more equitable and provides a robust opportunity for people experiencing a variety of barriers (such as accessibility, scheduling, etc.) to get involved.

- Cons: This approach might not adequately engage those in the community who prefer an in-person experience.

## IMPLICATIONS

1. Additional staff time is needed to attend the three meetings.
2. Costs associated with renting the venues and hiring audio-visual equipment are approximately \$5,000.
3. Additional staff time is required to prepare the materials for the open houses.
4. Not able to livestream the meetings – would have to outsource to livestream which would be costly.
5. Council needs to provide a motion to amend the Committee of the Whole Schedule and public notice must take place.

## RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council approves the following 2025 budget engagement and meeting schedule:

- (1) Open House at 4:30 p.m. followed by a Special Committee of the Whole meeting to be held in person at 6:00 p.m. at the Crofton Community Centre, in Crofton BC, on Tuesday, November 26, 2024.
- (2) Open House at 4:30 p.m. followed by a Special Committee of the Whole meeting to be held in person at 6:00 p.m. in the Heritage Hall at the Cowichan Community Centre, Duncan BC, on Tuesday, December 3, 2024.
- (3) Open House at 4:30 p.m. followed by a Special Committee of the Whole meeting to be held in person at 6:00 p.m. at the Chemainus Fire Hall, in Chemainus BC, on Tuesday, December 10, 2024.

AND THAT Council cancels the December 10, 2024 Committee of the Whole meeting scheduled for 5:00 p.m. at Municipal Hall in order to accommodate the 2025 budget engagement and meeting schedule.

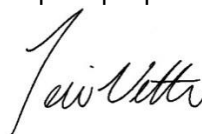
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**Approved to be forwarded to Council:**



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Ted Swabey  
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