



Saskatchewan Municipal

Management Resource

Effectively Developing Public Support for Your Initiative

By effectively engaging your ratepayers and community, you can increase public understanding of your council's initiative and increase your chances of success. Consider the benefits of demonstrating the importance of your project and why it is in the community's best interest to invest time and resources in its development. You can easily engage a broad base of stakeholders to support your initiative, such as other municipalities, businesses, media, residents, law enforcement, community organizations, etc. just by following simple guidelines.

► **Engage your public in stages**

Change in all communities takes time and effort. By engaging your public in stages, you can help make the transition easier. Begin the process by creating public awareness, building their knowledge of the issue or initiative, and then engage the community in action. Repetition is key – you need to provide your public with multiple opportunities to learn about the initiative, targeting your messages over time. Understanding that the process of public engagement happens in stages - from awareness, to knowledge, to action – makes the transition easier and allows you to tailor your strategy. It is important to remember that the process will take time, sometimes even years, to effectively engage your public.

► **Know your issue**

Before you begin your strategy for effective public engagement, you must know the issue and how the public views it. Research such as focus groups, public meetings, interviews, surveys, and correspondence with your ratepayers, will help you gauge public awareness of your initiative. Once you have that knowledge, you can start the process.

► **Targeting the right people**

In your public engagement strategy, try to target the right people to initiate change or to promote your initiative. Target those people or groups that will have the greatest potential to create change. Identify those decision-makers who can take action or influence decisions. Once you have convinced these groups of the need for action, the greater the chances are that the initiative will be successful.

► **Costs and benefits**

Change will not happen unless it is clearly shown that the benefits of the initiative will outweigh the costs of maintaining the current status. You will need to clearly state your case and convey the rationale for your initiative to each of your stakeholder groups. Unless each group sees a compelling reason to initiate change, it is not likely to happen. You must show them that it costs more to fix a problem than it does to prevent it.

► **Specific messages for specific groups**

To effectively engage multiple groups for your initiative, you will need to create specific messages and materials for each group. To find out what messages and resources will work best, you will need to research the groups, through consultations, meetings, etc. These messages should address differences between the groups, i.e. demographic, cultural, and economic, and be repeated, extended and delivered in a variety of ways to have maximum impact. It is also very important to note literacy skills and communication styles of your target audiences. Some campaigns include items such as issue briefs, brochures, and/or flyers.

► **Timing is everything**

Successful public support development campaigns capture and sustain public attention, provide relevant information, and continually make connections between issues related to the particular initiative or project and other public concerns. The timing of your campaign may just make the difference to your success. To take advantage of all possible opportunities, it is helpful to create and maintain relationships with your ratepayers, community groups, and all levels of the media.

► **Different can be good**

In some instances, hearing a message from an expected speaker, such as an elected official talking about the importance of a particular community initiative may be seen as predictable and easy to dismiss. Hearing the same message from an unexpected messenger can create increased interest and excitement, and can catch the public's attention. However, this method should be used in moderation as some messengers are more credible to some audiences than others and it is important to decide who the most effective speaker will be to a particular audience.