DRAGGING **BUDGET CONSULTATIONS** INTO THE **21ST CENTURY**

When it comes to improving government openness and accountability, it turns out there's an app for that. *By Joel Ornoy*

As the federal government announced its plan to invest more than $120 billion in infrastructure over the next 10 years, municipalities across Canada were quick to compile lists of urgent capital projects that they hope to tackle head on. Projects range from roadwork and bridge building to facilities renovations and the creation of new green spaces. Most communities have their own idea of what they'd like to accomplish over the coming years.

That such budget planning and implementation are exceptionally important for cities is not a new notion. As Jason Darrah, director of communications for the City of Edmonton put it, "apart from the civic election, no other activity in municipal government has as much impact on the life of our city than the annual budget process." However, like with any case of long-term planning, this process is by nature a challenging one.

It's no easy task for elected officials and city staff to effectively mediate comments, suggestions and criticisms from both citizens and the media, all while having the broad responsibility of developing new policies and projects. Traditionally, municipalities have mitigated these challenges by holding public consultation sessions to gain feedback from residents. Over time, however, these types of consultations have proven to be less than ideal. The reasons vary, including high costs, low turnout, and unrealistic feedback, among other issues.

This is where the Citizen Budget tool, developed by open-data non-profit Open North, comes into play. Open North's goal is to improve government openness and accountability, and increase public participation in democracy. Citizen Budget is basically a budget simulator that allows the public sector to build better community relations, educate residents and solicit their feedback on budget consultations. The best part is that it's all done conveniently online.

Online engagement: the new frontier

Citizen Budget is currently helping more than 60 North American municipalities boost their budget consultations, including Ottawa, Edmonton, London, Saskatoon, and Guelph. For national budgeting, Open North developed "Ready Reckoner," an alternative version that estimates the impacts of federal spending. Canada's Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer has deemed it such a "smash hit" that second phase of the tool's evolution is in the works.

Unlike a regular survey or budget visualization software, Citizen Budget is an interactive online tool that's highly customizable and can show the financial impacts of participants' choices in real time. It educates users about the trade-offs and constraints faced by their municipalities. The platform also opens up a wealth of data for city staff and elected officials. By creating a two-way dialogue between municipalities and their community through meaningful consultations, citizens can openly clarify their needs, values and preferences. This not only helps public servants frame an issue or a project in a way that speaks to residents, but it affords them a higher level of legitimacy in undertaking the decision-making process.

"Our voters were able to put their choices in perspective by instantly seeing how their decisions affected our bottom line," said Bernard Gagnon, the mayor for Saint-Basile-le-Grand, Quebec. "The resulting feedback has been invaluable in helping us plan next year's spending. We strongly believe in being responsive to the public's views and these new tools have been a great way for us to stay connected."

What started out in 2011 as a straightforward consultation tool for an innovative borough in Montreal, the Citizen Budget online simulator has grown to offer a range of different modules and widgets. It offers cities a plethora of options on how best to put questions to their residents. There are currently three versions, the first being the highly popular tax version, on which residents can vote for the programs and services they would like their tax dollars earmarked for. The second version, the balanced budget module, gives residents a chance to balance the city budget using real data. The latest version is the capital project module, which allows cities to consult with residents on major capital projects.

The fact it can all be done online is key to the tool's success. As Luc Richards, CAO for the City of Dieppe, New Brunswick, explained, it's a way for the city to involve more residents in the budgeting process. In fact, in a study done a few years ago by public relations giant Fleishman-Hillard, 54 per cent of Canadians surveyed indicated they would engage more with government if they could do so online. This number has undoubtedly gone up in recent years.

Cities have noticed that the quantity and quality of public participation has increased exponentially over traditional budget consultations. Take for example the Town of Newmarket in Ontario. Prior to using Citizen Budget, the town conducted

paper-based surveys at public events and in various locations. "After engaging the services of Open North to do a web-based version, participation in the budget survey tripled from the previous year's budget, and the open-ended feedback was invaluable for planning projects and priorities for the year ahead," explained Cindy Wackett, corporate project consultant for the town.

Taking capital projects to a new level

One of the first clients to use the Capital Project module was Grande Prairie, Alberta, for their municipal aquatic facilities. The online consultation gave respondents the opportunity to see what impact the various capital projects would have on their tax bill. The consultation attracted 1,800 respondents in less than two months, making it easier for city council to strike a balance between citizens' preferences and budget considerations to improve their aquatic facilities.

Most recently, the City of Kelowna in British Columbia announced the launch of its "2030 Infrastructure Plan," which calls for an investment of $1 billion over the next 15 years in the delivery of essential infrastructure and utilities to its residents. For this ambitious project, Kelowna effectively used Citizen Budget to engage its residents and tap into their opinions. Open North's tool was also featured in Kelowna's recent presentation on its infrastructure engagement at the last National Asset Manager's Conference in Halifax.

The trend toward online budget engagement continues apace as its benefits become apparent. Canadians across the country are making effective use of online tools to build more engaged citizenry, and the fact that so many municipalities like Kelowna, Regina, London, Markham, or the Borough of Plateau-Mont-Royal in Montreal are leading the way and committing to effective online public engagement around their budgeting processes is nothing short of commendable and gratifying.

But we need more cities doing the same. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's most recent pledge to leave infrastructure decisions in the hands of municipalities is highly encouraging and opens up exciting new possibilities to educate residents and solicit meaningful feedback. ❧

Joel Ornoy is manager of business development at Open North.