



OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER *Staff Report*

REPORT NO: CAO 2023-03

TO: Council

SUBMITTED BY: Sharon Chambers, CAO

PREPARED BY: Dana Steane, Digital Media Coordinator and Website Administrator

REVIEWED BY: Sharon Chambers, CAO

DATE: March 20, 2023

SUBJECT: Communications and Engagement Strategy Update

RECOMMENDATION:

THAT Report CAO Report CAO 2023-03 be received for information purposes; and further

THAT staff be directed to continue working with RedBrick Communications on the next steps to finalize the Township's Communications and Engagement Strategy.

SUMMARY:

Effective communications is essential in municipal government as it plays a significant role in ensuring the smooth functioning of civic services and infrastructure. Some of the benefits include increased public trust and participation, better decision making, enhanced community engagement, and financial savings.

This report provides background information on the development of the Township's Communications and Engagement Strategy. The report also reviews the findings of the initial research, internal and external engagement and resourcing analysis completed by RedBrick Communications. The report will also provide guidance on the next steps of the project.

BACKGROUND:

On February 7, 2022, Council received [Staff Report #COR 2022-005](#) during an Ad Hoc Budget Advisory Committee Meeting that outlined the 2022 Capital Program. This program included various department initiatives aimed at achieving Township goals and priorities set in the Strategic Plan.

In addition, as part of the Prime Ministers Path consultation, the Township recognized the need to revitalize the existing internal and external communications processes.

The 2022 Capital Program dedicated resources to improving corporate communications, community engagement, and customer service. As such, a need for the development of a corporate communications strategy was identified and a Capital Budget Request Form was submitted to engage the services of a third-party consultant to assist in the development of a comprehensive communication strategy that would guide the Township through to 2025.

Council approved the selection of Redbrick Communications, provider of strategic communications counsel and training to a broad range of public and private sector clients, as the third-party consultant.

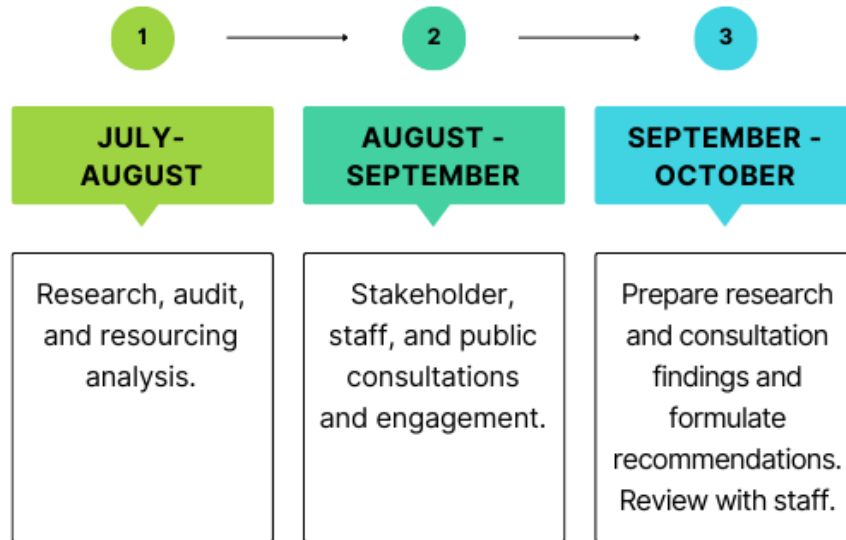
Township staff received a Communications and Engagement Strategy Proposal from RedBrick Communications on March 23, 2022. The proposal outlined project components, fees, and their proposed approach, including research, objectives, and overall strategic approach for the Township to ensure strategic goals and priorities are met.

REPORT:

Project Schedule

The project work plan has eight (8) stages that include: internal/external research, audit, and resourcing analysis; stakeholder, staff, and public engagement; preparation of findings and formulations of recommendations as well as staff review; recommendations presented to Council; finalization of recommendations and strategy; development of high-level public engagement framework and toolkit recommendations; a review of engagement framework and toolkit recommendations with staff; and presentation of communications and public engagement plans to Council.

The following stages were completed in 2022.



The project schedule sets out a timeline that will deliver a final Communications and Engagement Strategy to Council for consideration of approval in May 2023.

Research and Engagement

Internal

RedBrick gathered and reviewed a variety of Wilmot's current communication materials as well as new processes and tools. They also facilitated conversations with the Corporate Leadership Team, staff members, and members of Council as well as prepared an internal staff survey.

Through this process, they have identified that internally, Township staff need clarification on processes, roles, priorities, and expectations as well as increased capacity to ensure consistent, quality, and timely communications internally and externally.

There is a desire to rebuild trust and develop clarity and consistency within Council; this will help build community confidence in the management of the Township. To assist with this, establishing a stronger and more balanced online presence is critical to combat misinformation and improve Township information sharing and engagement.

External

To ensure public engagement and feedback, RedBrick prepared an online survey that staff promoted through the Township's social media platforms and website.

Through this process RedBrick identified that 94% of survey respondents visit the website for information with the top three (3) reasons for visiting being, recreation programs and services, recent news or public notices, and Council meeting information. RedBrick also identified that 77% of respondents are active on social media with the most widely used platform being

Facebook at 84%. Through social media platforms, respondents are looking for Township events, programs and services, recreation programs, and closures and services disruptions.

When the public were asked about how effective they think the Township is at providing opportunities for the community to give input into local programs, services, and decisions, 48% of respondents said they were moderately satisfied and are neutral as to whether past engagement has been meaningful.

Similar to the internal conversations that occurred, RedBrick facilitated stakeholders group sessions with a number of local groups and individuals.

- New Hamburg Concert Band
- NDWI
- New Hamburg Hockey Association
- Wilmot Horticulture Club
- Baden Optimists Club
- New Hamburg Lions
- Interfaith Counselling
- The Community Players
- Let's Tree Wilmot
- Wolverines Hockey Association
- Wilmot Softball
- SPECTRUM
- Paula Whitlow (Director of Truth and Reconciliation, Region)
- Trisha Robinson (Wilmot Family Resource Centre)

While the groups recognize that the Township is moving in a positive direction, they believe the Township can do more to celebrate community success, volunteerism, and the quality of life in Wilmot.

Some of the ways that this can be achieved is through more outreach with local groups, promoting and participating in community events, consistent information through Township platforms and information shared by Council, and seeking out diverse voices by establishing and strengthening relationships with local equity-seeking groups and representatives.

Resourcing Analysis

RedBrick conducted interviews with comparable municipalities to determine best practices and resourcing for communication services. Questions regarding the departmental structure for Communications, roles and responsibilities, relationship with senior leadership and Council, and departmental processes were covered.

They have spoken with:

- Municipality of Port Hope
- Niagara on the Lake
- Town of Georgina
- Town of Midland
- Town of Orangeville
- Town of Saugeen Shores
- Township of Oro-Medonte

Through this process they identified that communities of similar size to Wilmot generally have 2-3 Communications staff consisting of a manager, coordinator, and graphic designer.

Though a centralized approach is most common, clear roles and processes are a must along with a strong relationship between the communications manager and senior leadership.

Through the 2023 Municipal Budget process, the budget committee supported increased staffing with the Manager of Strategic Initiatives and Communications. This expansion in resourcing will be key in the successful implementation of the forthcoming Communications and Engagement Strategy.

Next Steps

RedBrick has proposed the following next steps in the plan to complete the Communications and Engagement Strategy.

1. Facilitated session with current Council.
2. Confirm strategic priorities and objectives.
3. Develop 3-year phased plan.
4. Develop the public engagement framework and toolkit.
5. Prepare Communications strategy to be approved by Council.

ALIGNMENT WITH THE TOWNSHIP OF WILMOT STRATEGIC PLAN:

Developing a Communications and Engagement Strategy for the Township of Wilmot supports the Townships' strategic goals of Quality of Life, Community Engagement, and Responsible Governance.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

The 2022 Capital Budget included a provision of \$30,000 in capital levy funding towards the Communications and Engagement Strategy. To-date approximately \$17,500 has been spent on consulting services from RedBrick Communications.

The 2023 Municipal Budget, endorsed by the Finance and Budget Committee included a provision for the Manager of Strategic Initiatives and Communication. This role is projected to have a net levy impact of \$27,339, with the majority of costs offset by the previous budget allotment for the Sustainability Coordinator / Grants Administrator role.

ATTACHMENTS:

Appendix 1 –Communications and Engagement Strategy Proposal from RedBrick Communications

Appendix 2 –Communications and Engagement Strategy Project Status Update Presentation from RedBrick Communications