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**Subject:** 2021 Budget Public Engagement Exercise

**Report to:** Budget Review Committee of the Whole

**Report date:** Thursday, October 15, 2020

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## **Recommendations**

1. That this report **BE RECEIVED** for information.

## **Key Facts**

- Niagara Region undertook a public engagement exercise to inform Council's consideration of the 2021 Budget and COVID-19 recovery plans. This campaign engaged with residents, business owners and other stakeholders through an online survey, and third-party facilitated focus groups.
- The provincial government legislates many of the services Niagara Region provides. During this time, the Region continues to deliver programs and services deemed essential.
- Budget engagement activities probed opinions on select investment areas identified by the Region's 2019 Sustainability Review, which highlights the municipality's continued efforts to streamline its business.
- The COVID-19 crisis and other pressures have strained the Region's already limited resources. The campaign aimed to get a better understanding of what our community's needs are during this time, using this input to help Council make the right adjustments to the budget plan to ensure there are no interruptions in the delivery of essential services to our community.
- The campaign aimed to educate and consult various stakeholders on specific areas of service that could provide the Region with a more focused and aligned strategy. It also gathered input on the municipality's continued involvement in key initiatives that fall outside of its core mandate.
- Overall, residents and business owners see the value in the Region's continued involvement in initiatives that keep residents safe and healthy, improve connectivity

and generate economic activity.

- Engagement activities were held over a number of weeks from late September to early October 2020.
- In all, more than 2,300 online surveys were completed. In total, 31 residents participated in four moderated focus groups. Four business leaders participated in a separate business-only session.

### **Financial Considerations**

Niagara Region delivered public engagement activities within a budget of \$40,000. In total, the Region spent \$35,331 on the delivery of focus groups, video production and survey promotion through newspaper and social media advertising.

The Region hired Pollara Strategic Insights to lead in the full delivery of focus groups, including recruiting of participants and analysis of feedback obtained through sessions. Because of current restrictions on gatherings, Pollara held five focus groups virtually over Zoom between September 23 and 29, 2020.

Other budgetary items include additional costs associated with the delivery of focus groups, and survey promotion through digital and print advertising, as well as the development of a video.

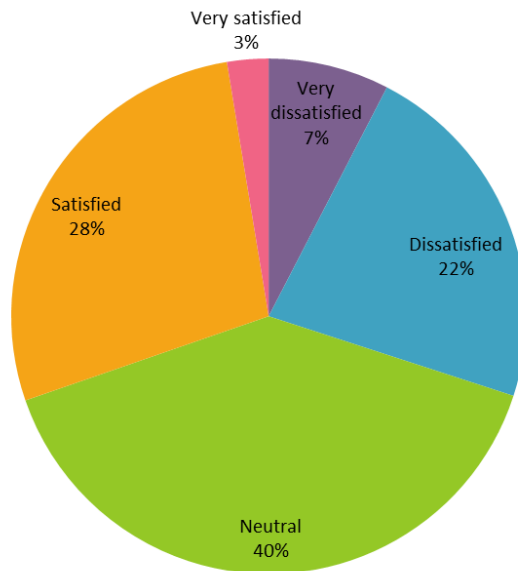
### **Analysis**

As part of its engagement exercise, the Region engaged with residents, business owners and other stakeholders with an online survey, and third-party facilitated focus groups. Generally, survey and focus group responses are consistent across the board with the exception of transit and business supports, which show a difference in the level of support. The survey question four shows 54% of respondent rank transit as low or of no importance. In the focus groups, while most do not use transit themselves, they believe it was important for others (students/seniors) and ranked it as a higher priority. As well, survey question three rated business supports the lowest of five priorities and the focus group discussion, revolving around an increase in jobs, gave it “some but less support”.

Online survey: Niagara Region conducted an online survey hosted on the Region website between September 25 and October 5, 2020. To drive participation, the survey

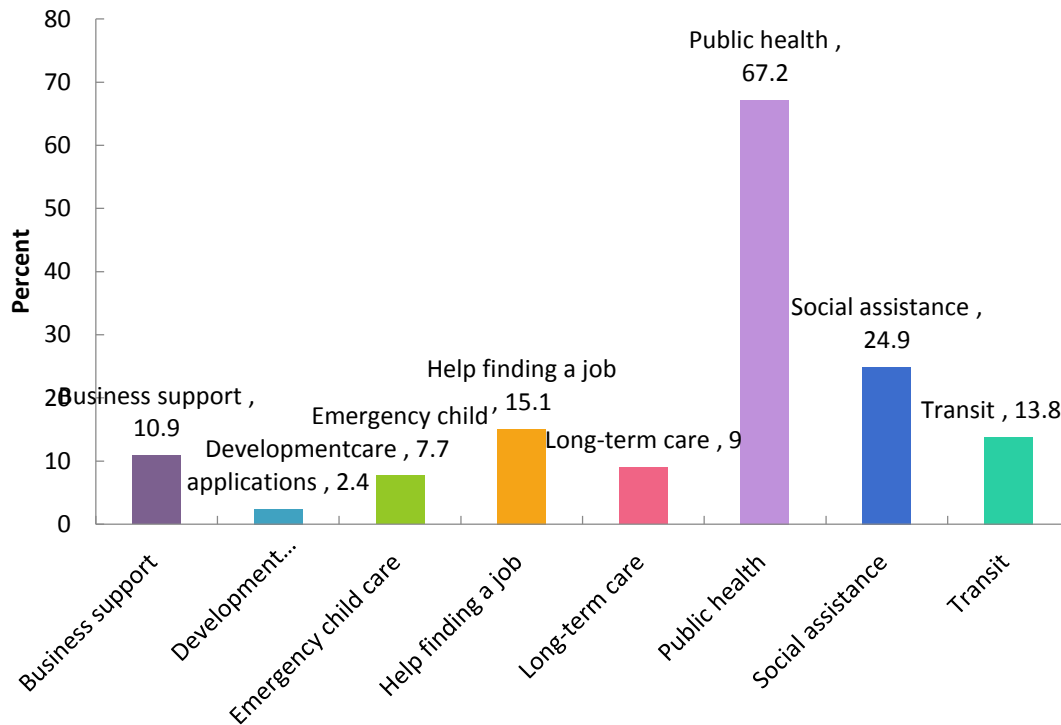
was promoted through newspaper and social media advertising, as well as coverage in local media. In total, the Region received more than 2,300 responses from across the region. Below are some of the findings:

1. The following pie graph shows resident satisfaction with the programs and services provided by Niagara Region.



Value	Percent	Count
Very dissatisfied	7.6%	138
Dissatisfied	22.4%	405
Neutral	39.7%	718
Satisfied	27.7%	501
Very satisfied	2.6%	47
Total		1,809

2. Residents were asked what services they have relied on more since the start of COVID-19.



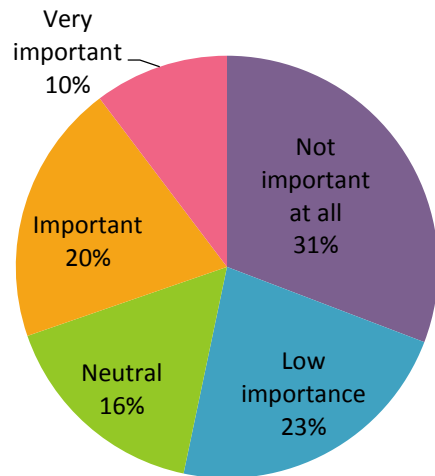
Value	Percent	Count
Business support	10.9%	94
Development applications	2.4%	21
Emergency child care	7.7%	66
Help finding a job	15.1%	130
Long-term care	9.0%	78
Public health	67.2%	579
Social assistance	24.9%	215
Transit	13.8%	119

3. Residents were asked to rank in order of importance what areas Niagara Region should focus on to help support them during COVID-19 (with one being most important and five being least important).

Item	Overall Rank	Score	Total Respondents
Maintenance of essential services, such as clean drinking water, waste collection, roads maintenance	1	5,172	1,464
Keeping seniors safe	2	4,991	1,444
Mental health	3	4,404	1,398
Support for homeless and those at risk	4	4,013	1,463
Supporting business	5	3,475	1,396

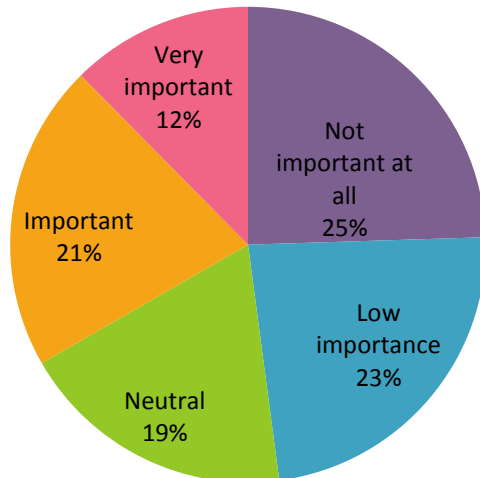
The online survey then asked residents to rate a number of existing Regional projects and initiatives on their order of importance. The purpose of these questions is to gauge residents' opinions of these areas during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. Niagara residents were asked how important it is for the Region to continue to invest in GO Train service enhancements.



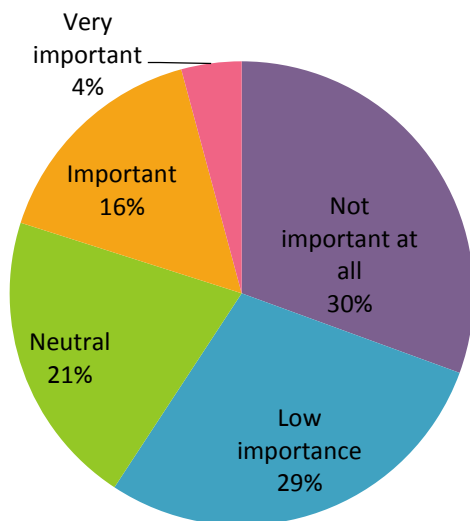
Value	Percent	Count
Not important at all	30.8%	527
Low importance	22.5%	386
Neutral	16.4%	281
Important	20.0%	343
Very important	10.3%	176
Total		1,713

5. Residents were asked how they would rate the importance of Niagara Region collaborating with local area municipalities and investing in integrating transit services.



Value	Percent	Count
Not important at all	24.5%	374
Low importance	23.4%	358
Neutral	18.8%	288
Important	20.9%	319
Very important	12.4%	190
Total		1,529

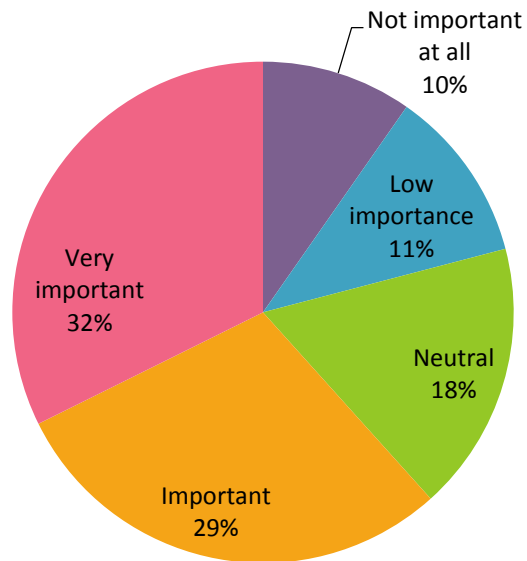
6. The Region asked residents how important is it for the municipality to contribute tax dollars toward projects that fall outside its area of responsibility such as hospital redevelopment, sports competitions, tourism, and incentives for local priority projects.



Value	Percent	Count
Not important at all	30.6%	457
Low importance	28.7%	428
Neutral	20.7%	309
Important	15.9%	237
Very important	4.2%	62
Total		1,493

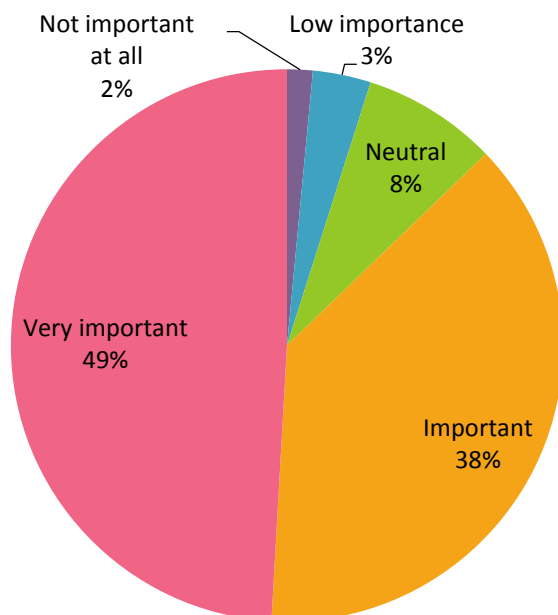


7. The chart below shows responses to the question around the Region's continued efforts to address a gap in affordable housing.



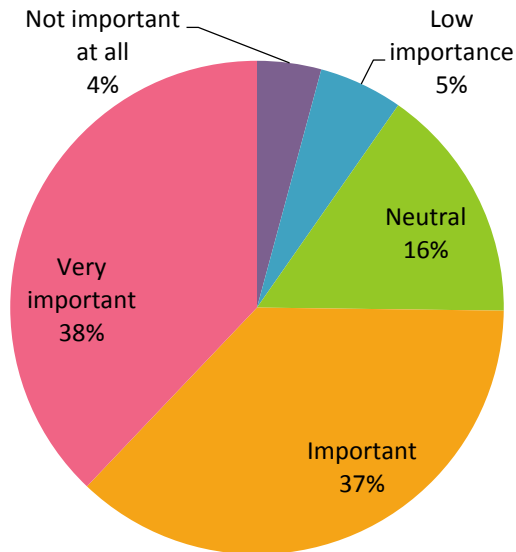
Value	Percent	Count
Not important at all	9.7%	143
Low importance	11.2%	165
Neutral	17.4%	256
Important	29.3%	430
Very important	32.3%	474
Total		1,468

8. The Region asked Niagara residents their level of support for the municipality's continued operation of Long-Term Care facilities and delivery of services supporting seniors.



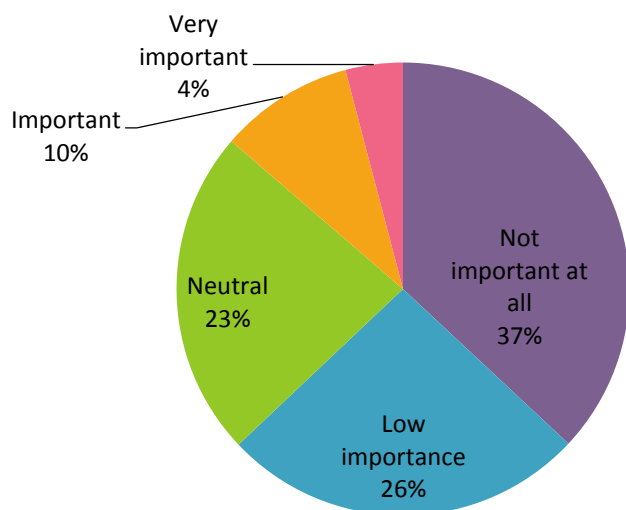
Value	Percent	Count
Not important at all	1.5%	26
Low importance	3.4%	57
Neutral	7.9%	134
Important	38.1%	644
Very important	49.1%	830
Total		1,691

9. Below is a graph showing level of support for the Region and Niagara's 12 Local Area Municipalities to study cost-sharing opportunities and other efficiencies.



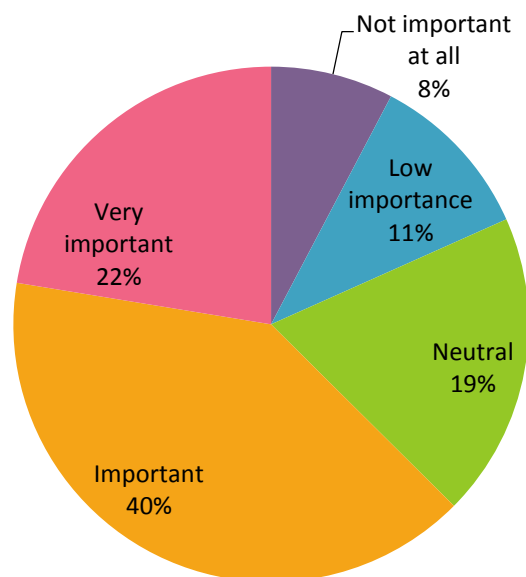
Value	Percent	Count
Not important at all	4.2%	64
Low importance	5.5%	83
Neutral	15.5%	234
Important	36.9%	557
Very important	37.9%	572
Total		1,510

10. Residents were asked their level of support in the Region possibility taking ownership of the District Airport and Niagara Central Dorothy Rungeling Airport, which are currently managed by their surrounding municipalities.



Value	Percent	Count
Not important at all	37.0%	548
Low importance	26.0%	385
Neutral	23.4%	346
Important	9.6%	142
Very important	4.1%	60
Total		1,481

11. The below graph shows the level of support among residents for projects aimed at helping existing businesses grow, or attracting new businesses to Niagara.



Value	Percent	Count
Not important at all	7.7%	114
Low importance	10.6%	157
Neutral	19.1%	282
Important	40.1%	592
Very important	22.4%	331
Total		1,476

The survey results are not meant to be binding. Rather, they are intended to offer members of Council with anecdotal evidence to gauge public support for the Region's continued involvement in key initiatives during COVID-19.

## Focus Groups

Pollara Strategic Insights hosted 31 respondents over four virtual focus groups held from September 23 to September 29, 2020. Four business leaders participated in a separate business-only session.

The results of the online survey and focus groups will be shared with the senior leadership teams of each department for their consideration when preparing their 2021 budget submissions.

This engagement was designed to produce qualitative and quantitative research that may assist Regional Council in the prioritization of projects and investment as it deliberates budget priorities for 2021.

Pollara Strategic Insights will present findings of focus group sessions to members of the Budget Review Committee of the Whole.

## **Conclusion**

Niagara Region is committed to ensuring services are aligned with the needs of residents and delivered in an effective, efficient and financially sustainable manner.

The COVID- 19 crisis poses significant challenges for municipalities across Ontario and Canada. In response to this unprecedented challenge, the Region continues to review plans and budgets to ensure the delivery of essential services.

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