Budget Engagement Overview

Budget Review Committee of the Whole
CSD 68-2020

Thursday, October 15, 2020

Peter Criscione, Communications Consultant

Lesli Martin, Vice President, Pollara Strategic Insights

Niagara Region

Niagara Region Budget Engagement 2020 Qualitative Results

Niagara Region

pollara strategic insights

September 2020

Background and Methodology

- The COVID-19 outbreak has caused Niagara Region to re-examine their budget priorities. Before finalizing its decisions, it was determined that qualitative research should be utilized to understand where residents believe the budget priorities should lie.

- The objectives of this research are as follows:
  - To investigate comprehension of the Niagara Region's role and mandate
  - To determine if there has been a change in perceived priorities since the COVID outbreak
  - To explore reaction to Regional mandates
  - To determine areas of high and low priority
  - To explore willingness to pay for new priorities with a tax increase.

- A total of five focus group discussions were conducted with a total of 35 respondents; four with residents of Niagara Region (31 respondents) and one with business stakeholders from the Region (4 respondents). The resident groups were recruited from a random sample of Niagara Region residents, while the business stakeholders were recruited from a list provided by Niagara Region.

- All groups were conducted between September 23rd and 29th, 2020, using a virtual Zoom platform.

Results in Detail

pollara
strategic insights

Understanding of Regional responsibilities is limited: those who do, question its efficiency

- Understanding of Regional responsibilities range from limited to none at all. Very few feel versed in this area.

- Business stakeholders do not feel positively about the role of the Regional government.
  - Inefficient spending;
  - Added bureaucracy;
  - Multiple priorities can lead to lack of focus.

- When asked about Regional services they have not been using, residents can easily mention local services (such a libraries, recreational activities and transit), but do not mention Regional services that have been impacted.

- Residents are less likely to name services they are using more, but some mentioned:
  - Garbage and Recycling;
  - Public Health (particularly mentioned by Business Stakeholders)

Affordable Housing and Homelessness is a top priority to most

Housing affordability is an issue for many Niagara residents. In recent years, the Region has aimed to address housing affordability including offering financial incentives toward the construction of additional units, although tackling the affordability gap is complex and requires a multi-pronged approach. Niagara Region also has a community action plan that is focused on strengthening Niagara's housing system so that everyone in the Region can find and keep a home. With the vision of a home for all, the plan outlines goals and actions the Region will take over the next 10 years to end homelessness and provide residents with suitable adequate housing to help them achieve their full potential.

- Affordable housing and homelessness is a top priority of all groups:
  - Cost of housing currently is unreasonable (both to rent and to buy) - Young people will be forced to leave because of affordability
  - Homelessness is believed to be on the rise, with many residents seeing it more than ever before.

- Residents are quick to discuss reasons and solutions:
  - Affordability: People coming from larger cities to buy cheaper houses or to rent them as short-term rentals.
  - Homelessness: Cannot be dealt with in a vacuum – must address causes (mental health, addiction), business stakeholder would like to see more subsidized housing.

- Business stakeholders do not believe the government is offering incentives and are more likely to blame the fees they pay to the different levels of government for the high price.

GO Transit service is a priority to many, but some would rather focus on Niagara Region

Metrolinx is working to expand and enhance the rail system that will provide commuters with two-way, all-day service. This expansion will see new stations built across Niagara. The Region has invested money to see this initiative come to fruition.

- Many feel this is an important initiative:
  - Traffic makes it difficult to get to Hamilton/Toronto;
  - Current service is too inconvenient to use;
  - Improvements will help young people stay in Niagara or bring in more people from outside.

- Some, however, are less positive about this initiative:
  - Will encourage a bedroom community;
  - Does not help all areas of Niagara Region;
  - Should focus on improvements within the Region.

- Business stakeholders all strongly believe this is of utmost importance:
  - Business needs it to flourish;
  - Will help them to get out of the Region when needed.

While many say an integrated transit system is important, few believe they would use it

St. Catharines, Welland and Niagara Falls, along with the Niagara Region, are working together to consider transit requirements for an integrated transit system. Work is underway to develop options for a joint transit system that meets the needs of all municipalities, in response to a motion from Niagara Regional Council (March, 2015) and subsequent support by the City of St. Catharines, City of Welland and City of Niagara Falls.

- Almost all agree that a Regional transit system is important:
  - Current system is inconvenient and takes too long to get anywhere;
  - Necessary for students/seniors;
  - Would be environmentally friendly.

- However, most do not use the transit system:
  - See Niagara as a car community;
  - Some believe if the transit system was better they might use it, but others say they would not give up their cars.

- In theory, transit is important.

While Long Term Care is not considered a top priority to most, it does receive strong support from all

Niagara Region currently operates 8 long term care homes. This year, the Region budgeted a large amount of budget to redevelop homes in St. Catharines and Fort Erie. This investment is among the largest capital program spending item for the Region to date and is a required update to meet modern standards. Legislation currently governing municipalities requires each municipality to establish and maintain a long term care home directly, jointly or through an agreement with another municipality. But currently the Region runs 8 facilities.

- All agree this is an important priority for the Region:
  - Covid-19 has brought the problems to light;
  - Niagara Region is an older community and therefore needs to take care of its elderly residents;
  - One LTC Home would not be able to house the people who need it, the Region definitely needs to continue with current levels of support.

- Despite the support, there were some questions:
  - What role does the provincial government play in supporting the initiative;
  - Is a redevelop the best use of funds when more beds are needed.

- Despite this overwhelming support, very few residents and no business stakeholders included long term care homes as one of their top priorities. This could be because it is not of personal importance to them. That said, ending support for this initiative would likely be met with backlash by all.

Residents are hesitant about the Region taking on other responsibilities

At times, other levels of government ask Niagara Region to contribute funds toward important initiatives that extend beyond our area of responsibility, such as hospital redevelopment, sports competitions, tourism, and incentives for local priority projects. For example, Niagara Region spent money to bring the Canada Summer Games to Niagara. I have another example of this. Currently there are plans to redevelop the West Lincoln Memorial Hospital. Generally, health care is not the responsibility of the Regional government but falls in the Provincial jurisdiction. However, the Region has been asked to contribute to the funding of this project.

- There is some hesitation regarding the Region supporting initiative that should be supported by other levels of government – some feel initiatives that help residents should be supported, others think the Region should stay focused on their mandate.

- Canada Summer Games – should only be supported if it will be financially profitable.

- Redevelopment of West Lincoln Memorial Hospital - support for this project is polarizing to participants.
  - Some feel health care needs to be improved and it should be part of the Region mandate to do support this;
  - Others become almost angry at the idea the Region would take on what should be the provinces responsibility.

Improvement to infrastructure receives strong support

Climate change is creating increased risks for major weather events such as severe and more frequent storms. This places more demand on existing infrastructure, may require more costly infrastructure to be built to mitigate these risks, and will require the municipality to have increased budget flexibility to deal with unexpected costs.

- Infrastructure is an important issue:
  - Often spontaneously mentioned as a priority;
  - Should be a mandate of the Regional government.

- The initiative of improving infrastructure receives strong support, and some believe Regional involvement could improve the efficiencies of the projects.

- While climate change is seen as an important issues, many do not think it is the responsibility of the Regional government.

Residents think business promotion is important, but businesses think it is not working

The Region is committed to creating an environment that allows businesses to flourish. Every year, Niagara Region invests in projects aimed at helping existing businesses grow, or attracting new businesses to Niagara.

- Residents feel this initiative has some importance:
  - Can help Niagara grow and flourish;
  - Can provide jobs – some disagreement whether it is better to support small business or encourage larger corporations;
  - Can help Niagara be more than a tourist area or bedroom community.

- Business stakeholders react more negatively to this initiative:
  - Region Is currently not promoting business;
  - Suggest keeping taxes down and removing red tape when it comes to zoning and permits would do this;
  - Should have industry-specific experts who understand what is needed.

Uploading the Niagara airports to the Region does not receive support

Currently Regional staff is in the process of preparing a report researching the costs and consequences of uploading Niagara District Airport and Niagara Central Dorothy Rungeling Airport, which are run by their surrounding municipalities.

- There is no support for this initiative:
  - Few have used this airport and do not know why this would be considered;
  - Some may support it only if it could generate revenue.

While all feel the Region is on the right track, only a minority would be willing to pay more tax to support it

- Overall, residents believe the Region is on the right track with the initiatives they are supporting.
  - Decisions on support on a Regional or Municipal level should be made on cost effectiveness.

- There is mixed reaction as to whether a small tax increase would be acceptable to pay for new Regional priorities.
  - Some would be willing to pay a small increase to help others in their community if it could be proven that it was necessary;
  - Many are not willing to pay an increase and feel the money could come from governmental efficiencies.

Conclusions

pollara
strategic insights

Conclusions

- The initiatives that are perceived to be the **Top Priorities** for the Region are as follows:
  - Affordable Housing and Homelessness: All agree that housing is too expensive and homelessness is a growing problem and believe the Region should be working on this issue
  - Eight Long Term Care Homes: This is an area thought to need improvement and all agree the Region should be involved and should do all it can (including running all eight homes). It must be noted that while very few choose this as a top priority, removing this funding would likely result in backlash from all.
  - Go Transit and Regional Transit: All feel that transit must be improved. Depending on where they travel and what they use, some place more priority on Go Transit, while others prioritize Regional transit. When asked to choose a top priority, many lump these two together as they feel transit in general needs to be improved.
  - Infrastructure: All agree that infrastructure needs to be supported, with many spontaneously mentioning this as an area that the Region should focus on..

Conclusions

- The initiatives that receive some, but less, support are as follows:
  - Business Development: Some residents support this initiative because they perceive it will bring more jobs into the area. Other residents are not sure this should be a mandate of the Region. Business stakeholders do not feel the Region is currently doing a good job on this imitative so are less likely to support it.
  - Assistance to Other Levels of Government: Support for this is on a case by case basis. Overall, some feel it is the Region's responsibility to fund any initiative that will help residents. Others do not want their funding to go to another government's mandates. Of the two examples given, support of the Canada Games is dependent on whether the Games will make money for the Region. Support for hospital redevelopment is polarized, with some feeling it is vitally important, while others believe it should be left with the province.
  - Climate Change: While some believe this issue is vitally important and should be considered by all levels of government, most do not think a problem this global should be the mandate of a Regional government.
- The initiative that receives the lowest support is:
  - Uploading of Niagara Airport: No one thought this should be a priority for the Region. Almost all said this was an initiative that could be abandoned.
- Only a minority would be willing to pay for any of these initiatives with a tax increase. Others feel the money could be found through government efficiencies.

Lesli Martin, Vice President

pollara
strategic insights
www.pollara.com

TWENTY21
NIAGARA REGION BUDGET

2021 Budget Public Engagement Results

Oct 15, 2020

Peter Criscione
Communications Consultant
Niagara Region

Lesli Martin
Vice President
Pollara Strategic Insights

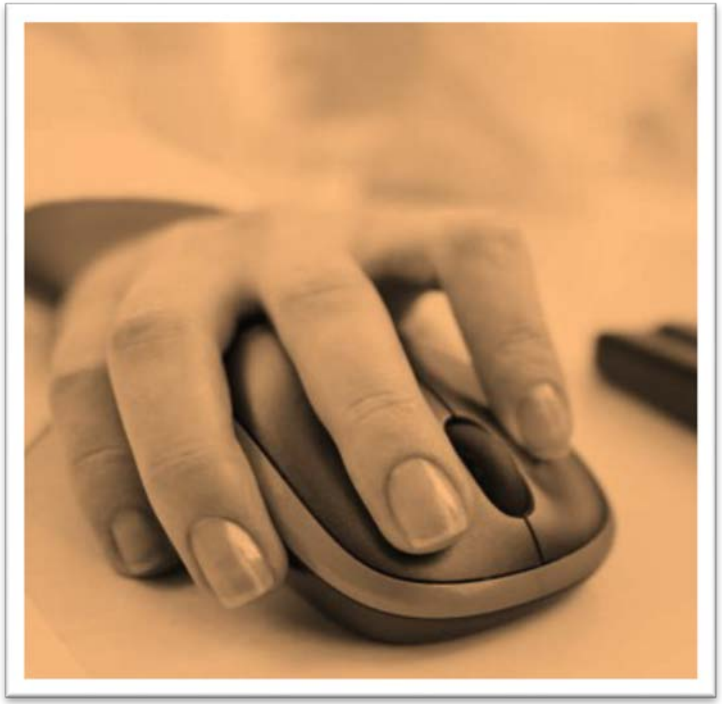
Why Do Public Engagement on the Budget?

1. The COVID-19 crisis poses significant challenges for municipalities across Ontario and Canada

2. Obtain input from the public and business community on budget priorities

3. Gauge opinion on municipality's continued involvement in key initiatives that fall outside of core mandate

2021 Budget Engagement Strategy

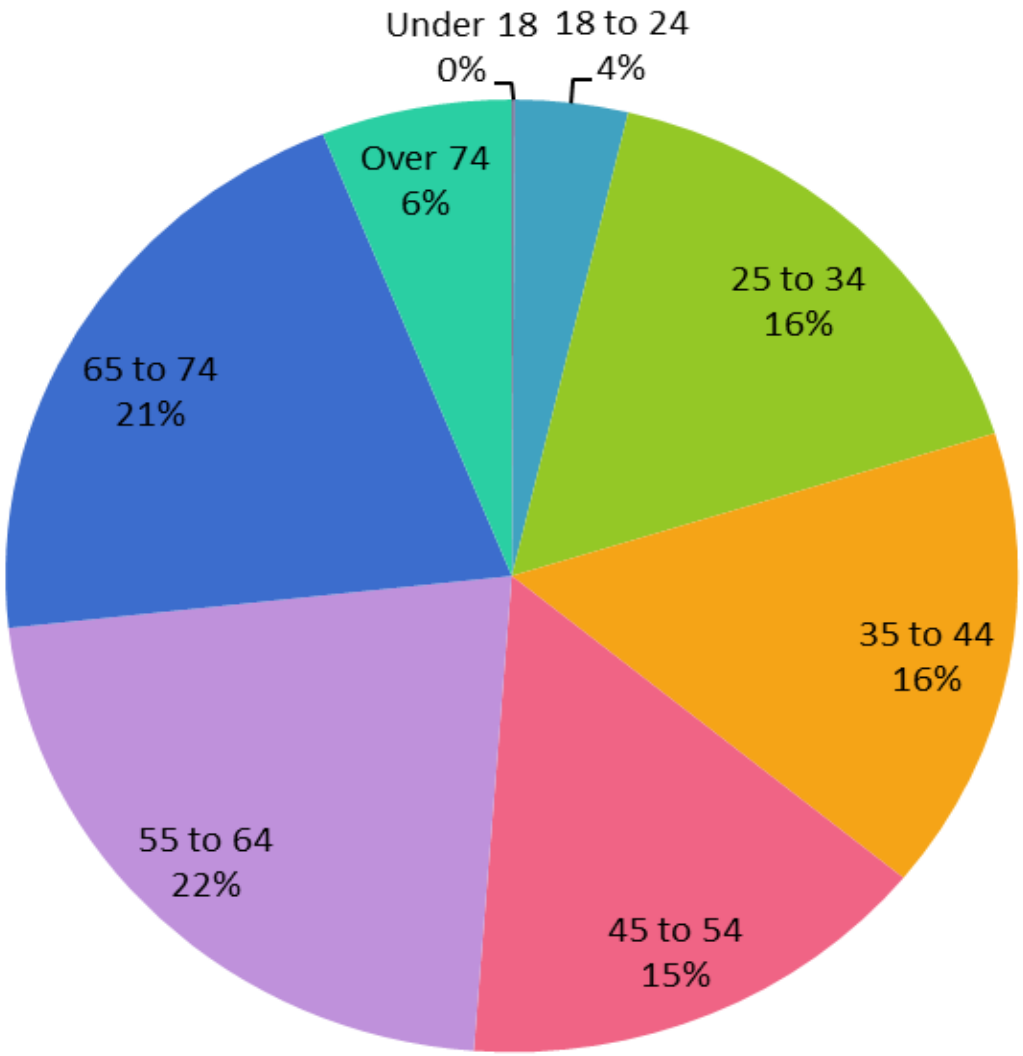


Online Survey

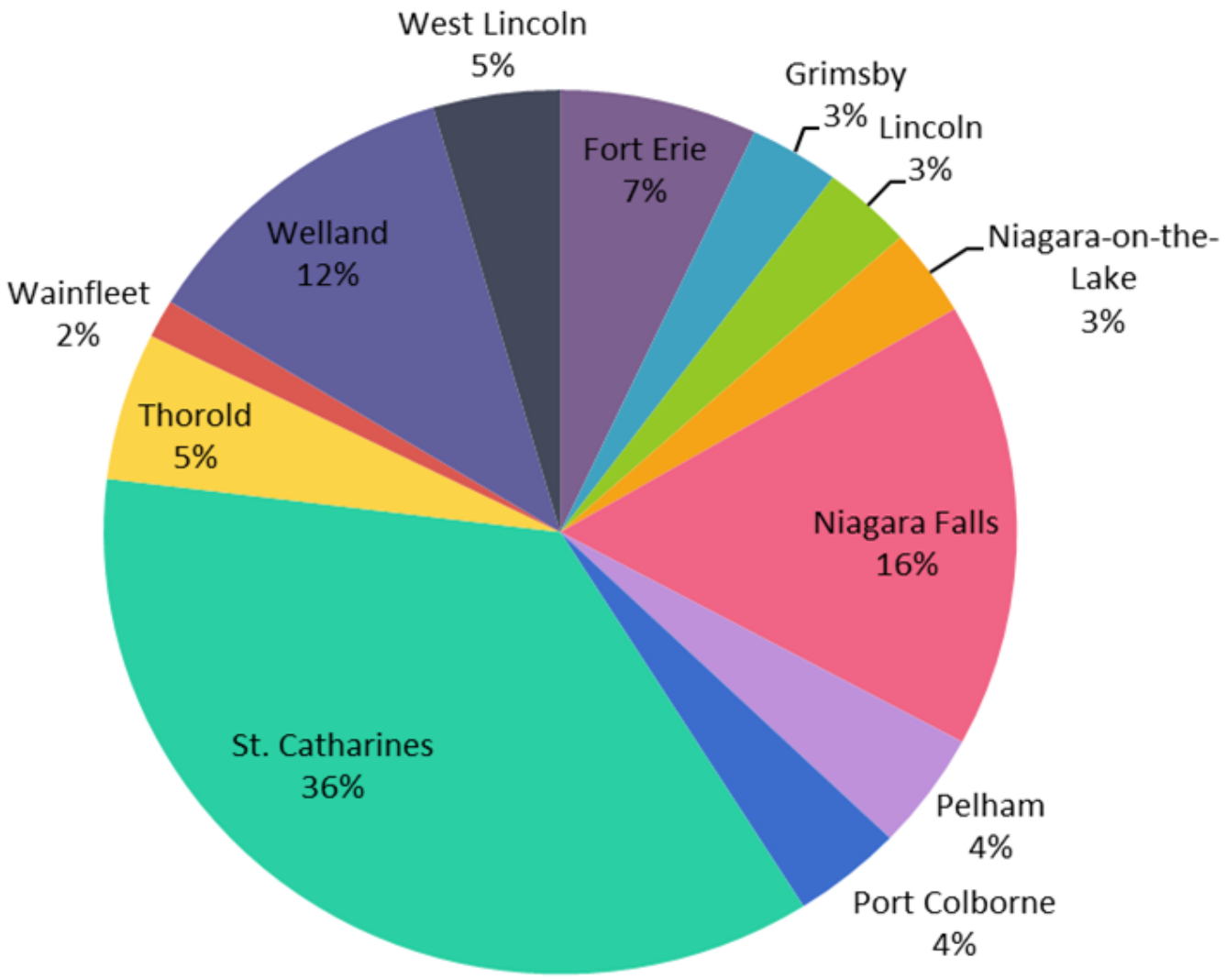
Third-party facilitated focus groups

Online Response Demographics

Age



Online Response by Municipality



Where do you live?

Key Themes / Findings

1. Services residents have relied on more since the start of COVID-19

Top Five

• Public Health	67.2%
• Social Assistance	24.9%
• Help finding a job	15.1%
• Transit	13.8%
• Business Support	10.9%

2. What areas Niagara Region should focus on to help support residents during COVID-19?

Top Five

- Maintenance of essential services
- Keeping seniors safe
- Mental health
- Support for homeless and those at risk
- Supporting business

3. What existing initiatives should the Region continue to support?

Respondents asked to rate the following projects in order of importance

- **Transit**
  GO and integrated transit
- **Special projects**
  i.e. hospital redevelopment, sports competitions, tourism, local priority projects
- **Housing affordability**
  Including providing building incentives
- **Long-term care homes and seniors programs**
  i.e. LTC redevelopment
- **Shared services**
  Study municipal cost-sharing opportunities and other efficiencies
- **Acquisition of regional airports**
  District Airport and Niagara Central Dorothy Rungeling Airport
- **Business supports**
  Marketing and other programs

4. Focus Groups Results

Pollara hosted five virtual focus groups from Sept. 23 to 29

Lesli Martin, Vice President

Pollara Strategic Insights