

Building
Our Community
Together

Public Engagement *Strategy & Toolkit*



Public Engagement

Strategy

Introduction

Our communities are constantly changing, and the expectations of our residents are evolving. How people share information, and the opportunities for involvement in decision-making, are changing too. Meaningful public engagement facilitates better conversations between government and residents so we can be responsive to the needs and wants of the people we serve.

What is Public Engagement?

Public engagement, also commonly referred to as public participation, is any process that involves the public in problem-solving or decision-making. It is premised on the belief that residents should have meaningful opportunities to engage in the decisions that affect their communities. It moves past one-way communication and welcomes residents into the decision-making process by ensuring timely information and awareness of opportunities to provide input before decisions are made.

Not all topics require the same level of public engagement. Based on the impact of the decision or change, and the input that is needed to inform the decision, different tools and techniques are considered in each instance.

Why do We Engage?

We engage because, although we have skilled technical experts working across our organization, no one knows the community and its nuances better than the people living and doing business in it every day. When we engage, their input becomes part of the decision-making process, helping elected officials, residents, and staff create communities that are responsive to what the community has indicated as important to them.

When public engagement is meaningful, everyone gains something valuable. Governments benefit from hearing diverse perspectives and understanding the public's interests, concerns, and priorities; and the public gains a greater understanding of roles, responsibilities and requirements. With increased communications, our accountability to residents is enhanced. Providing timely access to quality information ensures there is less misinformation and residents feel heard.

What is The International Association of Public Participation (IAP2)?

IAP2 Canada is an association of professionals in the field of public participation who seek to advance and extend the practice of public participation through training, certification, standards, values, and advocacy around the world.

The IAP2 developed a number of tools that have become commonplace amongst local governments. The Core Values and Spectrum of Public Participation assist in establishing clear expectations and defining the level of participation in any public engagement process.

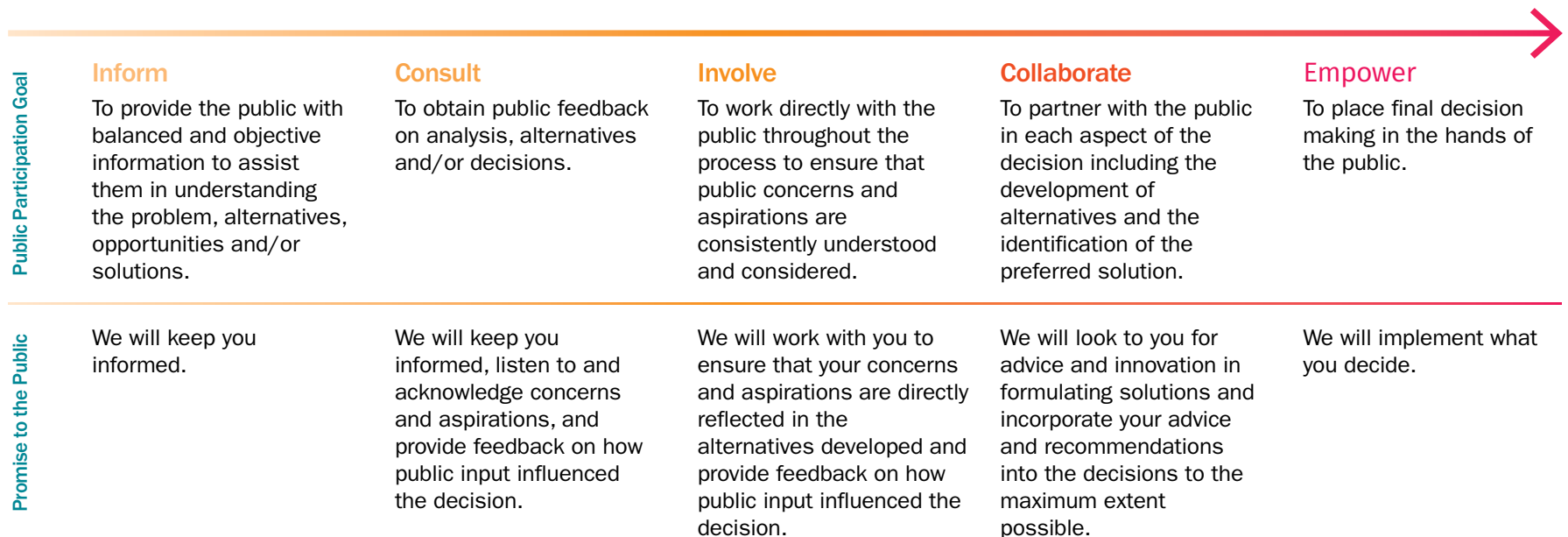


Core Values for the Practice of Public Engagement

1. **Public engagement** is based on the belief that those who are affected by a decision have a right to be involved in the decision-making process.
2. **Public engagement** includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision.
3. **Public engagement** promotes sustainable decisions by recognizing and communicating the needs and interests of all participants, including decision makers.
4. **Public engagement** seeks out and facilitates the involvement of those potentially affected by or interested in a decision.
5. **Public engagement** seeks input from participants in designing how they participate.
6. **Public engagement** provides participants with the information they need to participate in a meaningful way.
7. **Public engagement** communicates to participants how their input affected the decision.

IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation

IAP2's Spectrum of Public Participation was designed to assist with the selection of the level of participation that defines the public's role in any public participation process. The Spectrum is used internationally, and it is found in public participation plans around the world.



When Do We Engage?

Whether the public needs to be engaged in a decision should be a critical consideration when developing any new project or considering changes to a service or program. Public engagement may not be required or suitable in every case, but when it is, we want to ensure we are engaging with residents as early as possible. When engagement does not occur or is rushed, there may be negative impacts to the project schedule, costs, and public support. Early dialogue is important in determining when and to what extent public engagement is needed.

In British Columbia, the *Community Charter and Local Government Act* outline the minimum requirements for when local governments **must** engage. Generally, these are regarded as the **minimum** requirements and should often be exceeded.

Early dialogue is important in determining when and to what extent public engagement is needed.

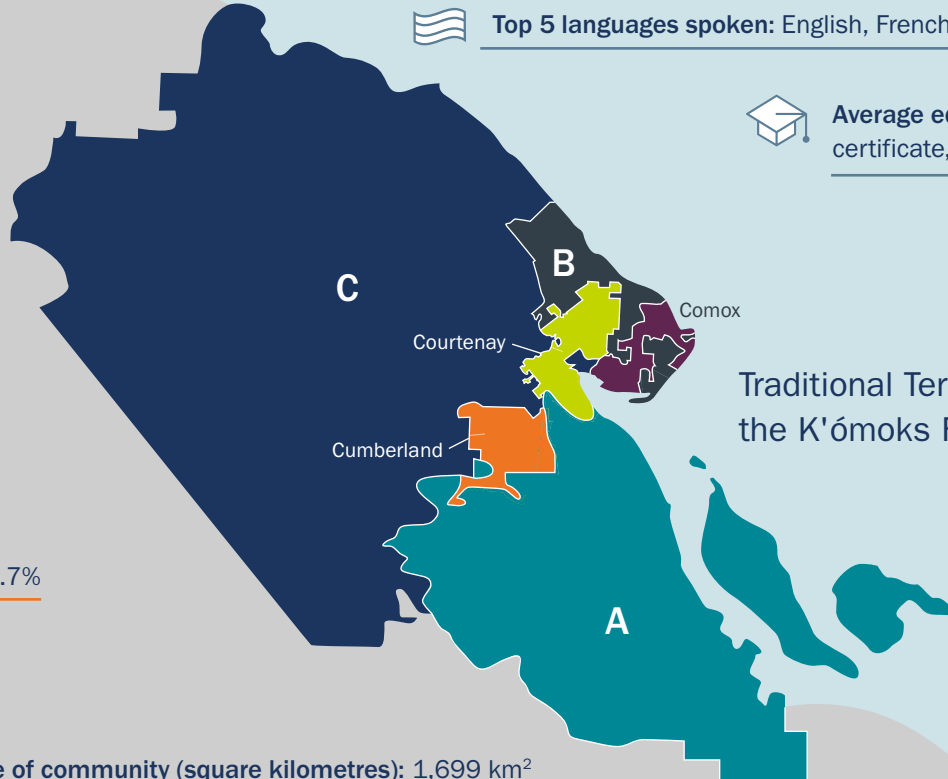


How Do We Engage?



Who Do We Serve? A Community Snapshot

Comox Valley Regional District



Number of households: 29,570

1 person: 8,730

2 persons: 12,560

3 persons: 3,825

4 persons: 2,975

5 or more persons: 1,485

Average household size: 2.2



Average age: 46.7



Average household income: \$54,861



Ownership vs. rental

Own: 76%

Rent: 24%



5 largest industries

Retail, healthcare & social assistance, accommodation & food services, construction, public administration



3 largest employers

Canadian Forces Base Comox
Comox Valley School District #71
North Island Hospital



Recent population growth (since 2011): 4.7%



Population: 66,527



Size of community (square kilometres): 1,699 km²



Top 5 languages spoken: English, French, German, Spanish, Cantonese



Average education level: Post-secondary certificate, diploma or degree

Sources for stats are from the 2016 Census and Trade and Invest BC (britishcolumbia.ca)

Roles And Responsibilities: Who Does What?

Elected Officials

Elected officials are formally responsible for making decisions that represent the interests and values of the community. They have an important role as decision-makers and advocates for public engagement and can contribute in the following ways:

- Represent residents and connect with them to determine top priorities for engagement.
- Prioritize engagement efforts by working with staff to identify areas where public input can make a meaningful difference to decisions and help set public engagement priorities.
- Help promote engagement initiatives and opportunities in order to facilitate a high rate of participation by a wide range of residents.
- Direct residents to the established processes for garnering, monitoring and compiling input, and avoid circumventing these.
- Allow staff to take the lead role in identifying best practices and methods for engaging the public on various issues.
- Consider input gathered from residents and stakeholders when making decisions and clarify the rationale for decisions reached.
- Ensure time and resources are allocated to support successful engagement efforts.
- Listen and observe public engagement and processes.

Staff

Staff lead the planning, implementation and reporting back from engagement initiatives. As trained professionals, staff members are responsible for developing and applying professional expertise in the area of public engagement, as well as being technical experts that provide background and advice on decisions being made. Staff responsibilities include the following:

- Work with elected officials to identify where public input can make a meaningful difference to decisions, program development and service delivery.
- Establish channels and processes to clearly identify community priorities for engagement, then ensure that the organization responds.
- Establish and communicate engagement priorities, then apply a consistent set of policies and procedures in designing and implementing engagement activities.
- Consult with elected officials and consider previous public feedback regarding engagement priorities, process design, framing issues, effective communications, and increasing engagement over time.
- Ensure timely and respectful communication with all those who engage, and show how their input has been used to influence decisions, programs and services.
- Engage in ongoing learning and professional development about public engagement best practices.
- Ensure that community input is well documented and that communication efforts are as complete and well-timed as possible.

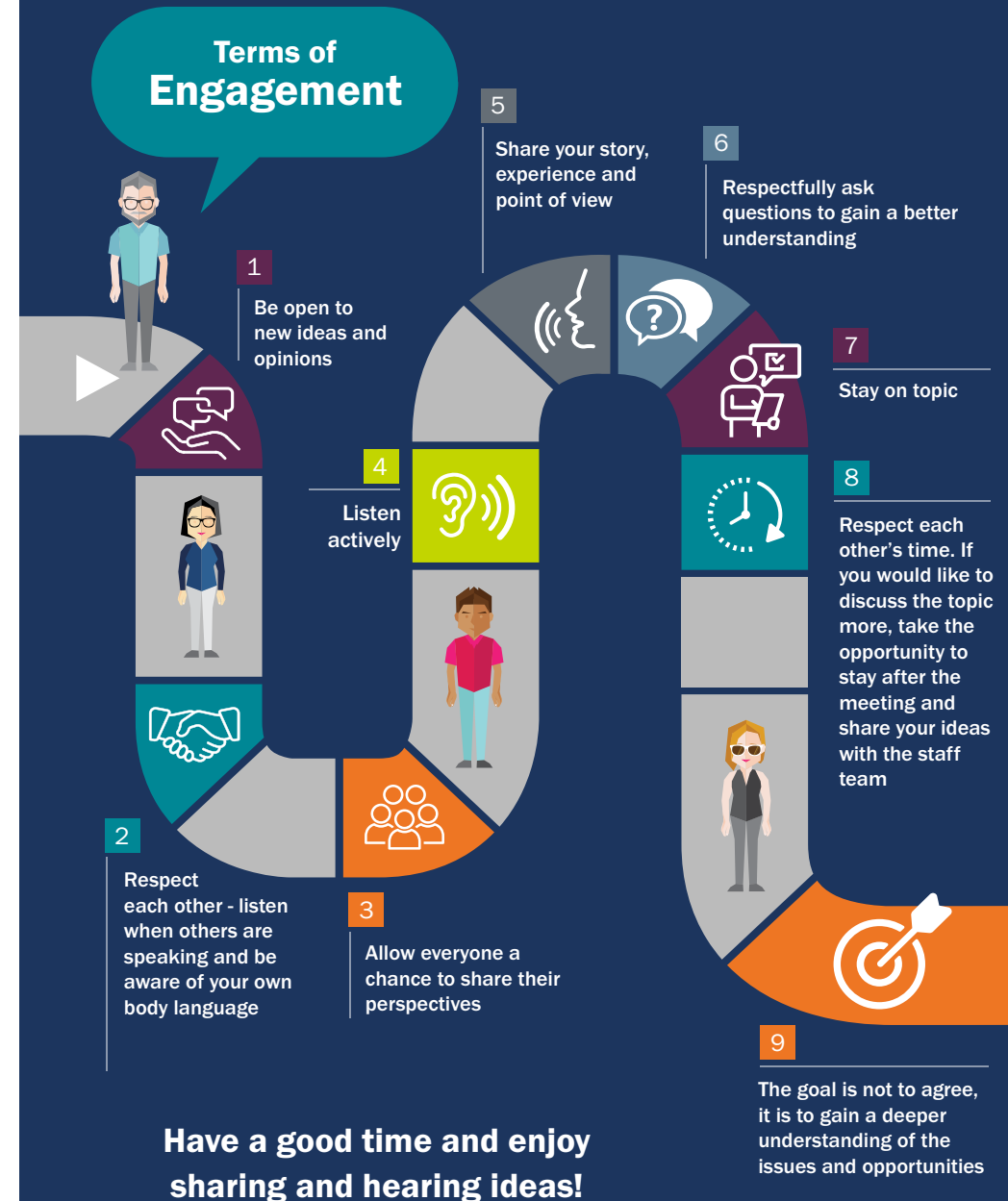
Residents

Residents contribute to informed decision-making and the quality of life in their community by sharing their ideas, experiences, and concerns in a constructive and respectful way. Their contributions can include the following:

- Help identify community needs and priorities.
- Identify barriers to participation.
- Make efforts to stay current and learn more about issues within the community.
- Participate in engagement initiatives and encourage others to participate.
- Express their point of view and contribute ideas while respecting opposing perspectives in a respectful way.
- Be willing to listen to and learn from other community members.
- Vote in local government elections.

First Nations

First Nations are important rights holders, and we are committed to working closely with our local First Nations communities. Consultation and engagement with First Nations communities occurs independently from the engagement of the broader public and requires a customized approach.



Thank You

The Comox Valley Regional District, Cowichan Valley Regional District, City of Courtenay, and the Regional District of Nanaimo would like to acknowledge and extend thanks to the many Canadian communities from which we drew inspiration, ideas, and best practices during the development of this strategy.

We came together as four local governments to develop an engagement strategy and toolkit that establishes a common language and approach to our engagement efforts and provides practical tools for our respective staff and communities to engage in a meaningful way.

