

Effective Online Engagement: A Municipal Context

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Student No. 227784

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Executive Summary:

Now more than ever before, taxpayers want – and expect – to be engaged by their municipal government. Citizens want to be more actively involved in their communities and weigh in on important municipal decisions. In turn, municipalities are reaching out to residents, empowering them to play a pivotal role in shaping their communities of the future.

In many ways – and for many communities -- online engagement is the conduit tying both sides together.

What is online engagement? How do we ensure that online communication is effective? How do we know that our efforts are working? Why are so many municipalities attempting to move their engagement online? Is online engagement an effective way of reaching constituents?

These are some of the important questions municipalities must consider when exploring online engagement to determine if this method of communication and service delivery is right for their community. I will take these questions into consideration further along in this report.

The ever-expanding digital world is changing how governments engage with taxpayers. All orders of government are exploring new ways to harness digital for a variety of uses. From social media to paying parking tickets online to using digital procurement – the opportunities for governments to run virtually are expanding all the time.

However, digital transformation is more than implementing the right technology and using the right online channels; it means viewing old problems and processes with new eyes and effectively changing government itself.¹

This paper will consider the various ways a municipality can delve into online engagement to ensure its own success.

¹ William Eggers and Joel Bellman, “The journey to government’s digital transformation,” Deloitte University Press, 2015, 16.

Outline

This report will begin with my own experience with online engagement and digital platforms in a municipal setting.

I will then look at online engagement – specifically the important role online engagement plays in a municipal government’s ability to effectively communicate with residents.

Online engagement strategies and trends for municipalities will follow, with specific focus on the tools that have fundamentally changed the way our citizens discover, consume and share information.

At the same time, I will illustrate the delicate balance municipalities must strike between engaging citizens’ online and employing more traditional communication methods for others where digital engagement is not possible or preferred.

The final part of my report will focus on a Public Online Engagement Strategy should be built in our 2019-2023 Strategic Plan as a Strategic Priority for Centre Wellington. This will streamline our communications efforts and provide guidelines and tools to support communications when conceptualizing, designing, implementing and evaluating online and public engagement activities.

Introduction

I've spent most of my career in municipal communications, working for both a smaller township and a larger city.

My involvement in online engagement began nearly a decade ago when many municipal governments began to shift their attention to delivering information to citizens via various digital platforms.

At that time, we continued to use standard marketing tools such as posters, and newspaper and radio ads; however, we quickly realized social media offered an opportunity to reach more people – literally at our fingertips.

Our municipality started using social media to share information with our community and visitors, and to provide a venue for meaningful two-way communication between the community, municipal staff and the city's committees and boards.

We worked with departments across the city, ensuring all valuable information had a place on social media. Facebook and Twitter became our main channels, which helped us build our followers quickly. We quickly found success in social media and it became apparent that there was value in creating a full-time position to ensure our information was shared in real time.

After 13 years in my role with the larger municipality, I accepted a communications coordinator position with a much smaller municipality, the Township of Centre Wellington. The position was brand new to the township – a role created to take the municipality to the 'next level' in terms of public engagement.

From day one in my new role, I stressed the need for a social media platform for the township.

The first step I accomplished was a social media/online communications policy that was approved by council and township staff at the Township.

A social media policy acts as a corporate code of conduct that provides guidelines for employees who post content on the Internet either as part of their job or as a private citizen.² The goal of the policy was to set expectations for appropriate behaviour and ensure that an employee's posts will not expose the municipality to legal problems or public embarrassment.

Many policies include directives for when an employee should identify him/herself as a representative of the municipality on a social networking website, as well as rules/direction for what types of information should be shared. This allows all parties to be on the same page, to understand the expectations while putting yourself out there as an elected official or a representative of the township.

² Sprout Social, social media management, advocacy and analytics software for businesses. www.sproutsocial.com

Our policy:

- Maps out how we will establish and monitor corporate social media sites and tools
- Centralizes oversight of a single corporate social media account
- Determines criteria for inappropriate content - which will be removed
- Provides protocol for response to sensitive or negative posts
- Ensures timely and accurate information and responses are provided
- Allows staff to monitor online conversations about township projects and business on work time

Once our social media policy was approved by council, I applied the knowledge I'd gained while helping to develop an online strategy for my former employer and recommended the township start small with a Facebook and a Twitter account – knowing both channels were the most popular and successful tools for Ontario municipalities at the time.

Today, there are many other options for online social media tools and engagement; those tools will be reviewed later in this report.

Two years after we launched our Facebook and Twitter accounts, I felt that the township was ready for an online engagement platform.

We worked with an organization called Bang the Table, specialists in online public engagement. Bang The Table's mission is to improve the quality of public debate and increase the level of community involvement in public life. They provide an online platform that allows municipalities to offer residents an opportunity to communicate with us 24 hours, 7 days a week.

I called the platform Connect CW. This online tool box allows me to drive inclusive, sustainable and measurable public participation on projects. I will delve more into the concept of online platforms later in this report.

What is online engagement?

Before going any further, I'd like to acknowledge what online engagement is.

Formally, online engagement is commonly defined as the interaction between people across a range of social networks.³ Yet, to us, it's much more.

For our municipality, online engagement can be a powerful response to the public's interest in influencing decisions and engaging with our government outside of election periods.

However, like all public processes, online engagement must be well designed, properly supported and resourced, and born from a genuine desire to engage citizens in a way that makes sense for the issue or decision at hand.

Done right, online and citizen engagement can support quality democracy, the legitimacy of government, successful implementation of policy, and a higher quality of life through the pursuit of desired social outcomes.

On the other hand, poorly executed engagement can lead to mistrust, bad decisions and discontent with governments.

³ MaassMedia E-Marketing Analytics. www.maassmedia.com/whatisonlineengagement

Why Engage the Community?

Typically, municipalities have engaged with the community to conform to regulatory or legislated requirements. However, in today's modern day of technology and transparency within municipal government, municipalities want to ensure residents have a voice in decision making.

It is important to encourage two-way dialogue, make it easy for people to join in the conversation and report back to citizens about the outcomes of the process. No one knows what is needed for our community better than those of us who live, work and play here.

In a world where technology is used in most forms of communication, the use of online engagement tools provides a way for members of a community to express their thoughts and feelings about a project in a more personal and non-threatening way. This leads to better, more thoughtful outcomes for governments and communities alike.

1. Online engagement offers the convenience and privacy of participation in a project that may be controversial in nature. Often in a live forum, the outspoken few may take over the conversation and opposing points of view are never heard.
2. Online engagement tools give people a place to be vulnerable and vocal without judgment.
3. Using online engagement tools, governments feel a deeper connection with their communities, gain greater confidence in their communications, and increase productivity.
4. Successful online community engagement can diffuse the most visceral of human emotions – like rage. At the same time, use of technology in online engagement allows governments to build trust through positive and powerful emotional connections.⁴

Other benefits of engaging citizens in decisions include:

- Fostering trust between the municipality and its citizens
- Enabling more input from diverse audiences to be considered in key decisions
- Increasing citizens' sense of civic responsibility and understanding of issues
- Reducing conflict and looking for common ground

The truth is that social media tools are just tools, and tools exist to help us do our work. The true benefits of social media, as tools, will be realized when they are helping you to achieve your municipal goals.

To be honest, giving your municipality an online presence does not always garner positive feedback. As a public entity, you will inevitably encounter people who deliberately post

⁴ Matt Crozier, Founding Director and CEO of Bang the Table. <http://www.bangthetable.com/blog/technology-human-emotion-coincide-foster-better-engagement-outcomes/>

disruptive messages. They may not be happy with a decision made by staff or council. They may be upset about a new residential complex, or new street lights put up in their neighbourhood. By placing your municipality on social media, you are exposing yourself to potential negative feedback. There are ways to react to these negative posts, and by creating a social media policy, this standard set of rules allows you to instantly remove posts that do not meet the requirements you set out. However, use this opportunity to have a meaningful conversation with your residents. Perhaps they were not fully educated on a decision, this will allow you to provide them with the necessary information so that they can understand why a decision may have been made. Respond with facts and resist from engaging in emotional arguments.

As a municipal communicator one of my goals is to provide meaningful opportunities for residents to participate in key issues. When I was researching online engagement platforms, I wanted to provide residents with an opportunity to have a say, at their leisure, on the projects and services that mean the most to them.

Types of Online Engagement

Municipal websites

Websites offer a portal to both the functions and services of a municipality, giving citizens and visitors a 'one-stop shop' to find answers to questions quickly. Municipal websites offer opportunities for citizens to participate in their communities and be informed about local news and issues, such as waste collection schedules and council meetings.

Online services

Governments are finding ways to improve services by enabling and encouraging online interactions. Residents can use online and digital channels to, for example, pay a parking ticket or report a missing recycling bin. These virtual counter services provide satisfying outcomes for both the municipality and residents, as well as potential cost savings.

Online public engagement

Online public engagement is a fast-growing municipal service, offering citizens the option to communicate with municipal governments online, either through social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, online engagement allows for real-time feedback on local issues. However, for online engagement to be effective, a municipality must have policies and procedures in place that ensure responses to conversations are appropriate, nimble, and if necessary, actionable.⁵

Digital Public Engagement

As lives get busier, municipalities are realizing that residents are becoming more accustomed to finding the information they need online rather than travelling the distance to a municipal office, town hall or public meeting.

New organizations are now offering municipalities digital experiences that allow them to share an online space - giving residents access to information and enable them to have more say. The software provides an online toolbox to drive inclusive, sustainable and measurable public participation on municipal projects. The range of digital tools empowers collaborative learning, discussion and debate about ongoing issues, events or trends in a community.

The Township of Centre Wellington has obtained the services of Bang the Table to create an online site for engagement, called Connect CW. This site has been used to showcase the top projects happening at the Township. It also allows the resident to see the stage of a project (i.e. if we're seeking public input or if the project is at the end of its lifecycle).

⁵ Association of Municipalities Ontario *#OnMuni Online: Towards Digital Transformation and Opportunities for Ontario's Municipal Governments*. www.amo.on.ca. 2017

The site offers a quick and easy way for residents to find the information directly online and provide their comments to us through, for example, surveys, forums, polls open-ended questions.

However, online communication isn't only about engaging citizens about a project or a survey. of the purpose is also to show them how much we – as a community – offer them.

For example, before Canada Day last year, we asked residents to take tell us via an online poll what they were doing to celebrate Canada's 150th birthday.

The poll garnered great feedback; residents shared different views and stories about traditions their families took part in to celebrate (e.g. picnics at a park, participating in the activities offered by various groups etc.)

Roles and Responsibilities for Online Engagement

We all have a role to play in delivering successful community engagement activities, including staff, council and citizens.

Typically, the role of online engagement falls under a municipal communications department. While some municipalities have decentralized their processes, giving different departments the ability to manage their own social media accounts, smaller municipalities still tend to centralize the responsibility with the communications department.

The City of Kitchener, through their Community Engagement Review, outlined clear roles and responsibilities for online engagement to manage expectations as noted below. This is a great tool that I will use as our township grows and the expectations of communications and online engagement increases.

Role of the City:

It is the responsibility of the city to assess opportunities for community engagement in dealing with specific city-led initiatives (except for issues dictated by law or regulation), to plan and manage the community engagement process including reporting to council on results when appropriate. The city will be transparent and accountable for acting in accordance with the commitment that is made to the public. Council and city staff will engage with citizens in a way that is respectful and considerate of citizens and will demonstrate that the views and involvement of citizens are valued by the city. In making decisions, council and city staff must balance a broad range of competing interests. The citizen's perspective is important and is typically not the only factor influencing a decision by the city. The results of the community engagement process must be put in the context of applicable legislated requirements, city regulations, council approved policy and strategies, technical considerations and financial constraints before a decision is made. When all things are taken into account, the city may make a decision that is inconsistent with the majority of input received from the community through the engagement process. In these situations, the city will explain to the public how their contribution was taken into account and the rationale for the decision that was made. The results of community engagement are never a substitute for the democratic process – and do not replace the legitimate role of elected representatives in decision-making.

Role of Council:

As key leaders and decision makers within the city, the support of city council is important for successful community engagement initiatives. Some of the key responsibilities in which council can continue to support community engagement activities include:

- Attend and participate in public meetings and events for engagement initiatives
- Share information about campaigns with constituents through social media, newsletters, and other methods
- Have informal conversations and/or ward meetings with constituents about key issues
- Review the information gathered through community engagement campaigns and use it to inform key decisions
- Ensure that appropriate project timelines and resources required for community engagement initiatives are in place
- Encourage city employees to follow the Community Engagement Policy and Framework

Role of citizens:

Citizens are asked to:

- Focus on the decision to be made or the question to be answered
- Recognize the city must consider the needs of the whole community
- Request alternative ways of participating if required
- Listen to understand the views of others
- Provide input and feedback within project timelines
- Encourage others to offer input⁶

⁶ City of Kitchener. *Community Engagement Review*. www.kitchener.ca. 2017

Best Practices for Online Community Engagement

Simply launching an online community engagement initiative doesn't necessarily guarantee a successful outcome for a municipality with respect to participation and feedback.

Based on knowledge gained from a series of projects, here is a list prepared by SustainNet, outlining online community engagement best practices worth considering when planning, implementing and managing an online consultation:

1. **Analytics** – If your organization engages online you must support your consultation with solid visitor and behaviour data. Otherwise, your project's level of awareness and engagement will be unclear. Similar to public meetings, not all participants attending an online forum will leave a comment.
2. **Questions** – Think about the questions you ask. For example, "What are your comments on the overall community budget?" may not elicit the same response as "Budget constraints mean we have to cut back senior care services, how do you feel about this?" It's important to develop questions that draw people's attention to an issue that they can relate to.
3. **Promotion** – If you don't spread the word about your online community engagement portal, your audience will not find it. Use a variety of promotional channels including traditional media, direct mail, and social networks to ensure that your community finds your online consultation.
4. **Usability** – Provide information about your online engagement project in a concise format that is easy to read. For example, using a 10 page PDF to communicate with a user that is trying to access your portal via mobile is not very effective. One page summaries and use of photos and video will likely be much more effective.
5. **Rules** – Set out the parameters of the discussion upfront. This includes moderation rules, closing dates, how the online consultation fits within the decision-making process and what feedback users should expect during and after the online engagement.
6. **Focus** – Don't get goaded in to a debate. Set facts straight, answer basic questions but don't get drawn in. Furthermore, make sure your colleagues have clear internal protocols for interacting with users during the consultation.
7. **Traffic** – Measure visitor data during the online engagement project to monitor consultation traffic levels. If your online forum is not attracting the desired level of visitation and page views consider incremental promotion. Remember, in most cases, visitors, not comments, is the most accurate reflection of success.

8. **Demographics** – Consider initiatives to target certain sections of the population. Bass Council used Bang the Table to target non-resident property owners and wrote to them directly. A local member of Parliament targeted young people and worked with schools to get feedback on youth unemployment issues.
9. **Social media** – Use sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and other local forums to get the message out to community groups that may be impacted by, or interested in, the issues being discussed in your online engagement project.
10. **Consistency** – Be consistent in your use of online consultation so that over time your community becomes accustomed to participating in this way. Like many things that are new, online participation will be treated with caution by some people until they get used to it.⁷

A key point I would like to mention is that online engagement is about information sharing. It is an opportunity to educate our residents. There are many times that I will hear the community discussing information on social media sites that is not factual.

I often go on community Facebook sites to see what people are talking about. *What are the concerns in the community? Is there truth to their facts or have they been misled?*

I do not post the correct answer on those sites, but I do use that information to share information on our corporate engagement platforms that educate our residents around a project they may not understand, or explain why a certain decision was made through facts that they may not be aware of. This in turn often clears up any misconception in the community. I use this as an opportunity on Facebook, Twitter and Connect CW to encourage residents to get the answers, straight from the source. If you have a question about a project or decision made by Council, come to us! Ask the Township. Get the correct information, right from the source.

When posting on an online engagement platform, it is important to:

1. **Post daily.** Keep your municipality at the top of people’s newsfeeds. Frequent posting keeps your brand visible. By sharing the recent news, events and updates for the municipality you are showing citizens that you want to engage with them, you want them to be present and you are offering them a way to engage with you. A good rule to follow is to post one to three times a day. (This is generally in reference to Facebook, Twitter and Instagram).

⁷ <https://www.sustainet.com/online-community-engagement-10-best-practices/>

2. **Use images.** Images greatly increase interaction rates for all social media platforms. Research has shown that Facebook posts with images have an 85 per cent interaction rate, compared with just 4 per cent for other post types. Images also increase re-tweets on Twitter by 35 per cent.
3. **Be personal.** Avoid sounding like a press release; show the audience that there are real people behind the municipality. Many employees that monitor social media are residents -- real people who have invested vested interest in the community from a staffing and citizen point of view.
4. **Listen.** Engagement is a two-way street. Hear what people are saying about your municipal brand and respond to critiques in a constructive and positive way. If users have valid complaints, don't just acknowledge them, address them. Then make sure everyone sees how responsive and generous your brand can be via follow-up posts.
5. **Monitor.** There are several free social media marketing apps which track shares, re-tweets, likes and keywords associated with your brand. ⁸

⁸ Big Commerce. *What is social media engagement?* <https://www.bigcommerce.ca/ecommerce-answers/what-is-social-media-engagement>

Crisis communications

Social media has also transformed how government organizations communicate during an emergency. Take for example the devastating wildfire that ravaged the northern Canadian city of Fort McMurray in May 2016. Engulfing close to 600,000 hectares of land, the raging inferno quickly destroyed thousands of homes and valuable economic resources—ultimately forcing the evacuation of over 80,000 residents from their homes.

In March of 2016, the Township of Centre Wellington was hit with a major ice storm which devastated many parts of Southern Ontario with substantial ice accumulations. Many homes in our community were without power for more than 24 hours.

We had launched our social media channels in January of 2016, so this was the first major situation that happened in our community after our accounts were created.

I took this opportunity to push out messages to our residents that included safety tips for those without power, tips on clearing brush from properties that were hit substantially with falling branches or trees due to the ice, food safety and more.

Social media became the tool for the township to create a two-way dialogue between our residents and staff. At one point, we opened an emergency shelter at our local recreation centre for those without power and, through social media, we managed to share this information quickly across the community. Those with power and access to information on Facebook and Twitter visited family members in the rural areas and advised them of any updates and information as it was released.

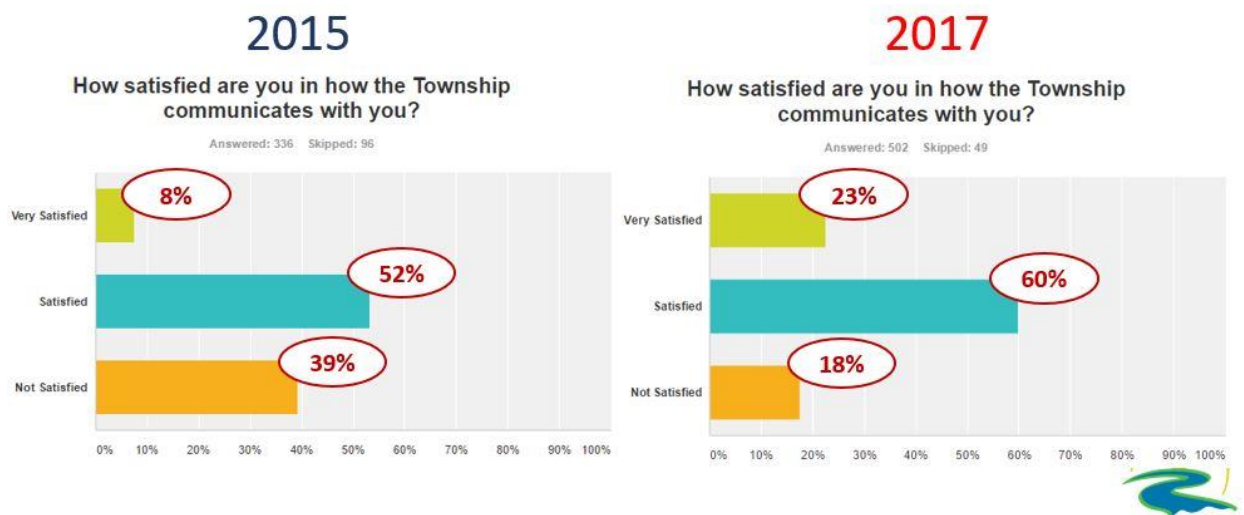
Following the storm and clean-up, we saw our social media accounts triple in followers!

Online Community Engagement Framework

As mentioned earlier in this report, two years ago, the Township had no online community engagement. After implementing Facebook, Twitter and Connect CW, our community has grown leaps and bounds.

In 2015, our mayor sent out a survey, asking residents numerous questions about our services and programs including their satisfaction with how the township communicates with them. Two years later, in 2017, he sent out the same survey – and received overwhelmingly positive results. We attribute this feat to the growth of our social platforms and our commitment to communicating with our community on another level.

Communication ... moving in the right direction!



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Online engagement does not happen overnight, and it is important to continually assess your methods of communicating to ensure you are using the appropriate ways to reach out to citizens.

Social media should be part of municipal engagement; it should not stand on its own. Social media doesn't replace your other forms of communication and engagement; it supplements them, and should be part of an overarching communications and engagement strategy for your municipality.¹⁰ We continue to use newspaper, radio and town-hall meetings as a personal way

⁹ Township of Centre Wellington. www.centrewellington.ca. 2017

¹⁰ Alberta Urban Municipalities Association/Alberta Association of Municipal District & Counties. *Social Media Resource Guide* https://www.auma.ca/sites/default/files/Advocacy/Programs_Initiatives/citizen_engagement/social_media_resource_guide.pdf

to reach out, and it is important to give residents an opportunity to meet with the mayor and council, ask questions and feel like there are numerous ways to interact with their local government. For example, our Township has a population of almost 30,000 people. We currently have a high urban area, however approximately 8,000 residents living in our rural areas do not have access to high speed internet, which makes it difficult to communicate through online methods solely.

In terms of online engagement, I have used this report as an opportunity to research how I can bring our current efforts to the next level and develop Guiding Principles for Community Engagement.

To develop these final principles, I will engage residents online and in person. However, through my research I found these principles from the City of Guelph, which may serve as a strong starting point for our work.

1. **Inclusive:** The city designs engagement processes that will allow all community members a reasonable opportunity to contribute and to develop a balanced perspective. The city builds relationships with stakeholders by using a range of activities to engage diverse participants.
2. **Early involvement:** The city involves community as early as possible in the engagement process so stakeholders have time to learn about the issue and actively participate.
3. **Access to decision making:** The city designs processes that will give participants the opportunity to influence decisions.
4. **Coordinated approach:** The city coordinates community engagement activities to use community and city resources effectively.
5. **Transparent and accountable:** The city designs engagement processes so that stakeholders understand their role, the level of engagement and the outcome of the process.
6. **Open and timely communication:** The city provides information that is timely, accurate, objective, easily understood, accessible and balanced.
7. **Mutual trust and respect:** The city engages community in an equitable and respectful way that fosters understanding between diverse views, values and interests.
8. **Evaluation and continuous improvement:** The city evaluates engagement activities to ensure engagement processes are effective.¹¹

When creating an Online and Community Engagement Framework for the Township, I will ensure residents understand what we are looking for from public engagement – and, in turn, we understand what engagement means to them.

¹¹ City of Guelph. *Community Engagement Framework*. www.guelph.ca. August 2015

The framework will be an essential component to promote trust and credibility in the engagement process; and, help us develop a consistent approach to community engagement.

Ultimately, we will look to the framework to help us establish our engagement goals and guiding principles, and equip us with tools and templates needed to ensure consistent and active participation in the planning, implementation and evaluation of our programs and services.

Conclusion

Digital government transformation is happening now and municipal governments need to be flexible, adaptable and responsive to ongoing digital innovations. It will be a challenge, but the ongoing process of digital transformation will be beneficial for citizens, municipal employees, and elected councils alike.

Municipal governments can begin by considering what their vision of online engagement will look like for their community. The vision could include priorities, such as increasing citizen engagement, developing economic opportunities, or enhancing innovation by embracing disruptive advancements to traditional ways of doing things.

Being risk receptive, empowering leaders to challenge the status quo, developing a workforce that is digitally literate, and continuously learning new trends and opportunities of digital will help a municipal government be adaptable and agile to user needs and the rapid pace of change.

Online community engagement must follow a consistent and transparent process that lets community members understand how and why a decision is made, and lets them know that their input was considered in the process.

By encouraging and embracing digital online engagement, municipal governments may also find efficiencies to help them along the path to fiscal sustainability while improving the day-to-day lives of their residents.¹²

The Township of Centre Wellington's Good Government priorities, which were created through our strategic planning process and make up our Strategic Plan, hold us accountable to: make informed decisions, operate efficiently, get results, communicate openly and engagement the public in all important decisions. Our vision is for our citizens to have a meaningful role in the decisions that impact the quality of their life. We are committed to being transparent and accountable to citizens, and give them the opportunity to participate in the democratic process, thus providing effective and meaningful online engagement.

Ask the people, ask the right questions, and provide meaningful conversation and outlets for them to share their opinions. Then, take their opinions and answers into consideration and show them how their feedback makes a difference.

It will come full circle and your community will appreciate being involved and feel connected to their local government.

¹² Association of Municipalities Ontario *#OnMuni Online: Towards Digital Transformation and Opportunities for Ontario's Municipal Governments*. www.amo.on.ca. 2017

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