Public Engagement Opportunities to Enhance Local Government Decisions

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Executive Summary

Introduction

This master’s project presents answers to the question “what are the best tools and methods to most effectively and efficiently engage the public on local government service delivery in the Comox Valley Regional District?” Developing a strong awareness of how to engage effectively is deemed to assist in the efficient delivery of local government services because it can assist in a municipal government to better understand what services should be delivered, how often, and in what manner. Developing a better understanding of how a municipality engages with its public and stakeholders is important because increasingly, the public expects opportunities for input and involvement with how public resources are distributed and how communities are developed. Further, there is a normative argument in place in that citizens should participate in community building because they are seen to best know their neighbourhoods and understand how to shift community support towards positive improvements (Blanchet-Cohen, 2014, p. 265).

The Comox Valley Regional District, which is the client for this project, is facing the pressure to engage its public and stakeholders in an effective manner. The problem occurs in part due to the abundance of public engagement techniques, public expectations associated with how a government will engage, and an approach to engagement that does not always align with specific organizational objectives. The Comox Valley Regional District conducts a variety of public engagement activities as it delivers its many services. Some public engagement is deemed to be well-received and services are delivered in an effective manner whereas other engagement results have resulted in an acrimonious environment where elected officials, staff and citizens’ goals are disjointed.

The result is that the Comox Valley Regional District staff do not always have a strong understanding of the type or frequency of public engagement that should be applied in any given project. This master’s project attempts to provide guidance to staff, elected officials and members of the public to enable more effective and efficient decision-making during public engagement activities, with the goal to ultimately improve service delivery to the public and stakeholders.

Methodology and Methods

A wealth of knowledge was obtained about public engagement by conducting a literature review and doing internet research on public engagement frameworks and techniques. Also, to gather information about smart and worst engagement practices, interviews with staff or practitioners were conducted from the following municipalities:

- Comox Valley Regional District;
- City of Victoria;
- Capital Regional District;
- Regional District of Nanaimo; and
- Metro Vancouver.
The eight semi-structured interviews conducted for this project unearthed positive and negative experiences associated with outreach efforts.

Key Findings

Three themes were identified through the research and interviews:

- being purposeful,
- being organized
- being genuine.

Being purposeful means establishing clear goals for public engagement and then determining the public engagement techniques that will directly achieve those goals. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum of public participation provides clear and tangible examples of the goals that can be set and associated actions.

Being organized means developing a coherent plan to achieve the stated goals and then implementing that plan. The plan must incorporate interests from all stakeholders, both inside and outside of government.

Being genuine relates to the appreciation that stakeholders, particularly staff members and practitioners, must have for the role that public engagement plays during service delivery. Some projects have minimal public engagement that is limited to informing the public about a new program or service whereas other projects rely on public engagement activities to add value to a new service or solve community-wide projects. Local government staff who genuinely appreciate public engagement will demonstrate to the public that public participation is important.

Using these themes, a public engagement model was developed to help guide engagement activities for local government projects.

Options and Recommendations

The following are options that may be considered by the Comox Valley Regional District for implementation following the conclusion of this master’s project.

**Option 1 - Maintain the status quo in regards to public consultation**: meaning that outreach and engagement efforts being conducted at the CVRD continue in the same manner as has always been done;

**Option 2 - Implement portions of the public engagement model**: certain elements of the model can be embraced and implemented or the implementation can be phased over a series of months or years as resources and opportunities present themselves. For this option to be successful, the implementation plan noted in section 6.3 should be customized to reflect the staged implementation timeframe;
**Option 3 - Implement the public engagement model in full:** this project describes the public engagement model (in section 6.2), implementation strategy for the model (section 6.3) and assessment framework (section 6.4);

**Option 4 - Research additional public engagement techniques:** this project acknowledges some of its limitations associated with the breadth and range of research conducted and also the limited development of some specific engagement techniques. The CVRD may opt to understand these topics in greater detail before the model is implemented or as some of its elements are applied to real-life situations.

The Comox Valley Regional District is **recommended to proceed with option 3 (implement the public engagement model in full)** to realize the benefits associated with purposeful, organized and genuine public engagement that will lead to better decisions being made and the more effective and efficient delivery of public services. Option 3 would include the steps below being undertaken in the following order:

**Step 1 – Comox Valley Regional District board of directors to adopt the public engagement policy.**

Education about public engagement, methods, purposes and outcomes is required before the board should consider adopting the policy. By adopting the policy, a strategic direction for public engagement is defined and all parties can develop their understanding for engagement activities in local government projects.

**Step 2 – Comox Valley Regional District staff (practitioners) to develop education material associated with a) the public engagement model in general and b) specific engagement actions**

Developing education material helps to promote common awareness and understanding of terms and practices used in engagement activities. The common understanding and language helps to ensure all parties are on the same page for how outreach is conducted, what processes can be expected and how decisions are made.

**Step 3 – Comox Valley Regional District staff (practitioners) to develop and implement a public engagement assessment framework.**

The assessment framework allows the CVRD to analyze its engagement efforts and work to continuously improve those efforts. The assessment framework should be developed soon after adopting the public engagement policy and applying the policy to projects. The assessment framework is a key component to promoting the genuine application of public engagement.
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1.0 Introduction

Many times, local governments are trying to find solutions to the problems of society that are often associated with diminishing revenues, aging infrastructure, increasing public expectations, and expanding environmental regulations (Coyne, 2004, p. 6). Public engagement can often be used to share information, gather public perspectives on important topics, and help make decisions regarding these topics.

This master’s project compiles the tools and actions that are intended to help local governments in general and the Comox Valley Regional District specifically to conduct effective and efficient public engagement.

1.1 Defining the Problem

Each year, the Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) has operating and capital programs that use various levels and types of public engagement to provide feedback and guidance to elected officials and administrators. In some cases, extensive public meetings, open houses, written information and surveys are used to obtain input or develop policy while in other cases, engagement is limited to paid advertisements or there is no engagement at all.

For this project, public engagement means to “involve those who are affected by a decision in the decision-making process” (IAP2, 2016). Expanding on this definition, public engagement can also be described as “the practice of involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy-forming activities of organizations/institutions responsible for policy development” (Rowe and Frewer, 2005, p. 253).

CVRD staff members who were interviewed for this project tend to believe the regional district’s engagement efforts yield positive results when decisions are well-received whereas in other cases, engagement efforts do not result in an effective outcome. These perceptions are subjective and are dependent on the person judging the outcomes and the clarity of project goals at the project outset. Parks programming and delivering recreation services are examples where engagement has been deemed positive and siting sewer pump stations or proposing regional garbage collection are examples of public engagement that have not resulted in a positive outcome. No specific surveys or evidence exist to suggest why the discrepancy exists between these types of engagement.

Local governments can often offer citizens access to elected officials and public servants in ways that cannot be matched by more senior levels of government. For example, a village or town office is located within the community and the elected officials often have very local ties to the community they represent. Further, a decision by a council or board made one night will often be seen and felt by the community the next day.

The CVRD has many examples where service delivery is positively received by the public and some experiences where the CVRD has been forced into a reactive position due, in part, to insufficient public engagement and negative public feedback. The CVRD operates under the Local Government Act (Local Government Act, 2015) and the Community Charter (Community Charter, 2015).
and must publicly engage on some aspects of its operations. This engagement ranges from legal notices in newspapers to public hearings to elections or referenda; however, there are many more opportunities where local governments can engage. Yet at the same time, it is important to identify where it is not appropriate to engage the public or other stakeholders.

The problem this master’s project seeks to address is that CVRD practitioners do not always know the type and level of public engagement that could or should be used that would lead to successful service delivery. The definition of successful service delivery relates to a variety of conditions, including the level of acceptance of a project, the amount of public input incorporated into service delivery, minimizing tax dollars to deliver services, and meeting public expectations. For any given project, the definition of success changes depending on the input variables, project parameters, people involved, and the formal or informal goals. Being clear about the effectiveness and the efficiency of service delivery is also an important aspect to understand. Effectiveness can be described by saying that broad consultation is conducted, questions are fully answered and services are delivered in a very complete and acceptable fashion. Effective service delivery, however may require extensive public resources, including tax dollars, to achieve its results. Efficiency can be described as minimizing the amount of time and resources that a project requires to be completed. A highly efficient project, however, may not meet expectations associated with outreach, collaboration or public involvement. Therefore, in considering successful service delivery, an optimized balance between effectiveness and efficiency should be sought.

In a time where the media, business and the public in general are placing a higher degree of scrutiny on the public sector and elected officials and in a time where there is emphasis on seeking a more effective use of tax dollars, public engagement is an important tool that can help better decisions be made and communicate process and outcome between and among the public sector and its variety of partners.

1.2 Project Client

The client for this project is the Comox Valley Regional District, which is “a federation of three electoral areas and three municipalities providing sustainable services for residents and visitors to the area. The members of the regional district work collaboratively on services for the benefit of the diverse urban and rural areas of the Comox Valley” (CVRD, 2015). The direct client at the CVRD for this project is Debra Oakman, the chief administrative officer.

The CVRD operates under provincial statute and delivers more than 90 services ranging from water supply and sewage to parks, recreation and land use planning. The CVRD collected nearly $20 million in property taxes in 2015 (CVRD, 2015, Bylaw No. 365). Using these funds and other sources of revenue, the CVRD must deliver its services and, routinely, that service delivery either requires the CVRD or presents opportunities for the CVRD to engage with the public.

1.3 Project Objectives and Research Questions

The primary research question for this master’s project asks “what are the best tools and methods to most effectively and efficiently engage the public on local government service delivery in the Comox Valley Regional District?”
Service delivery, in this project, refers to the range of activities undertaken by local governments, from land use planning to budget setting to policy development. As the range of projects and services delivered by local governments vary, so too must the tools to achieve objectives. Whereas governments are experiencing a range of choices with which to deliver services in response to rising public expectations about the public sector (Aucoin, 2012, p. 179); and whereas the public expects efficient service delivery and use of resources (Andrews, R., and Van de Walle, S. 2013, p. 763), a critical review of how and when to engage with the public will enable the CVRD (and any other local governments with similar criteria) to maximize its responsiveness to public needs. This project will deliver a model for local government practitioners to identify the available and preferred methods for public engagement in a variety of scenarios.

Within the context of a local government setting, this project will:

- explore the process for public engagement within the scholarly literature focusing on the local level of government as much as possible;
- identify the general strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats associated with public engagement;
- seek to understand the public expectations associated with service delivery, programming and public input at the local government level; and
- establish a baseline set of tools and methods for public engagement in a variety of contexts that align with the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum for public participation (IAP2 Canada, 2015). The spectrum categorizes engagement along a continuum from passive to active and from informed to empowered. One end of the spectrum (inform) identifies a one-way conversation where the audience is informed through advertisements or newsletters and the spectrum’s other end (empower) describes efforts such as voting, citizen juries and delegated decisions.

Through the course of this research project, the specific application of certain engagement techniques in effective and efficient manners becomes evident. The role of local governments is, broadly stated, to deliver services such as parks, community water supplies, garbage collection and management, recreation and planning. More specifically, local governments must understand their local citizens and deliver services that cater to the direct needs of those local people and businesses. As noted earlier, this project intends to help local governments in general and the Comox Valley Regional District specifically to identify the engagement actions that will seek to identify local desires and preferences for service delivery.

1.4 Organization of Report

This report is organized in a manner that follows the order in which the project itself was conducted. The introduction (section 1) describes the problem, the client, the objectives and research questions as well as some background on the project. The literature review (section 2) describes the focus for literature research, materials searched for and general themes identified in the literature. A conceptual framework (appendix A) is also included in this section. The methodology and methods (section 3) describes the high-level internet research and semi-structured interviews that were conducted with practitioners at the Comox Valley Regional District as well as four other local governments in British Columbia. The research findings are presented
in section 4 and report on the CVRD activities and current state as well as promising practices at participating local governments. The discussion and analysis (section 5) promotes three themes associated with public engagement, which are being purposeful, being organized and being genuine. The options and recommendations in section 6 introduce the public engagement model and implementation strategy and a concept for an assessment framework. Finally, the conclusion (section 7) summarizes this master’s project. A number of tools to implement the model and educate users are included in this report as appendices.
2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

Public engagement has been extensively reviewed and analyzed at the general level and within a variety of subthemes ranging from health care to criminal justice and across scales from nationwide initiatives to neighbourhood level actions. At a local government level, various academic journals including the International Journal of Public Administration, Canadian Public Administration and Public Administration Review have many articles detailing types and methods of public engagement. Further, Australia is considered a forerunner on public engagement, which is beneficial to this report in that both Australia and Canada follow the Westminster system of government (Cambridge, 2015).

Within this master’s project, the literature review focuses on three principle themes: basic elements and principles of public engagement; technology that is used for public engagement; and opportunities for improvement with public engagement. Each of these principle themes is explored from a local government perspective. The basic elements and principles of public engagement are intended to establish a foundation for understanding the value, purpose and benefits of effective engagement. This foundation will underpin research that is conducted for this project and transfer knowledge through the project’s deliverables. The technology theme recognizes the massive role that the internet and social media play in contemporary society so that technology use can be maximized during engagement activities. Finally, the section on opportunities for improvement recognizes methods that can be used for more effective engagement. While the available research on public engagement is vast, this master’s project pulls together the various interests from notable contributors to the topic, including Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) and Firmstone and Coleman (2015), and summarizes the interests within the themes noted here.

The primary source for literature searching is the online University of Victoria library website at http://www.uvic.ca/library/ including JSTOR, the humanities index and the social sciences abstract. Key criteria used in this literature review includes using phrases such as “public engagement,” “community consultation,” “deliberative democracy,” “local government outreach,” “public engagement history,” “public engagement technology,” “trends in public engagement,” “successful public outreach” and “consultation spectrum.” During the literature review research stage of this project, efforts were made to restrict the research to academic articles that related to Canadian local governments primarily, though some attention was paid to other North American examples and examples from other British Commonwealth countries. Generally, given that a significant volume of academic research exists on public consultation, articles that were no older than five or six years were sought for this project to improve the relevance that the research has on current conditions. One notable exception is Rowe and Frewer (2005), due to it being referenced frequently by other articles and it establishing a benchmark for public engagement methods.

Just before the section on the conceptual framework, a description of public engagement and local governments in Canada is provided. This section will provide some context to assist with bringing the range of engagement techniques, methods and trends to a local government level.
2.2 Basic Elements and Principles of Public Engagement

Public engagement is a term that has been cast broadly and can incorporate a vast array of efforts to communicate in a variety of ways with a variety of stakeholders, user groups and people. Historically, engagement involved one-way communications from a government body to the public through mass media (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015). Small, community-level conversations could be held on specific issues, though the audience, input and dialogue did not always serve a broader agenda. In more recent years, budget pressures have increased and public expectations relating to accessibility and accountability have changed the ways in which governments communicate with citizens. Technology also has created opportunities for enhanced engagement, as is shown in section 2.3 below. The principles of public engagement, however, appear to remain constant.

To conduct public engagement in a successful manner, a meaningful and deliberate effort by government is required. Specific efforts include:

- Engagement should provide feedback to participants (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015, p. 690);
- Audiences should be specifically selected and understood in order to maximize participation and output (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015, p. 683);
- Open dialogue between the government and its citizens is maintained and collaborative (Zhang and Liao, 2011, p. 284); and
- Using bottom-up approaches to establish public credibility while being aware that lobby efforts and special interests exist (Kamenova and Goodman, 2015, p. 5).

Public engagement must be genuine. Where a government uses an engagement approach that ignores the principles above or merely pays lip service to the public, distrust and acrimony of the process can develop. As Firmstone and Coleman (2015) describe, “democratic governments at all levels are paying more attention than ever before to the dynamics of public engagement” (p. 681). These dynamics arise from the growing pressures in contemporary society to be collaborative, consultative and consensual on decision making.

A secondary principle associated with public engagement relates to the risk of not conducting engagement. Many legal frameworks that exist in British Columbia, namely the Local Government Act and Community Charter, require local governments to conduct engagement. This is underscored by Firmstone and Coleman (2015) as even with the frameworks defined in legislation, successful engagement relates to the process employed (p. 684).

A case study of an engagement exercise in the City of Edmonton provides good examples of applying some of the strategies described in this literature review. Kamenova and Goodman (2015) begin by saying that “public deliberation is generally considered an effective mechanism for involving citizens directly in decision-making on contested sociopolitical issues that require the negotiation of competing viewpoints held by the public” (p. 1). The City of Edmonton was interested in understanding the level of public interest for online voting in civic elections. Through the use of citizen juries, mock elections, roundtable advisory meetings and online surveys, extensive data was collected to provide context for the city council to make a decision. While the council ultimately determined not to pursue online voting, the engagement exercise helped bring
public perspective into the decision-making realm. Kamenova and Goodman (2015) go on to describe the positive and negative elements associated with a top-down versus a bottom-up approach to engagement. On the one hand, top-down approaches can be perceived as “deficient due to the degree of control exercised by the sponsoring institution” (p. 5) whereas bottom-up approaches have more credibility provided that caution is exercised to ensure awareness exists for any lobby efforts or special interest groups that may override a bottom-up approach.

In order that the methods of public engagement are characterized in this research project, reference to the broadly referenced academic paper *A Typology of Public Engagement Mechanisms* (Rowe and Frewer, 2005) is noted here. Rowe and Frewer (2005) set out three levels of engagement as public communication (one-way flow of information from government to the public), public consultation (one-way flow of information from the public to government) and public participation (two-way flow of information between government and the public). Distinctions are provided between consultation and participation in that “rather than simple, raw opinions being conveyed to the sponsors, the act of dialogue and negotiation serves to transform opinions in the members of both parties (sponsors and public participants)” (p. 256). Rowe and Frewer (2005) go on to categorize more than 100 different kinds of engagement activities. These activities are scored based on their effectiveness in a variety of contexts, depending on the desired outcomes (p. 285).

### 2.3 Public Engagement and Technology

The emergence of the internet and social media has presented, in seemingly equal proportions, opportunities and threats to public engagement. Firmstone and Coleman (2015) identify the manner in which citizens can influence public discourse on any number of topics. Citizens can produce the news on independent sites, contribute to news that is then incorporated into professional newscasts, add content to social media sites that forms news for some people and participate in online forums thereby creating news (p. 682). This type of participation is in stark contrast to the pre-internet and pre-social media ages when “citizens had few opportunities to contribute to the triangulated sphere of communications between politicians, journalists and citizens” (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015, p. 681).

Technology and public engagement has commonly been interconnected in that local governments use the internet and social media to push information. Technology has historically provided a one-way street by which the public is provided with information. More recently, public feedback has been sought by local governments to inform their initiatives, evoking the public communication and public consultation descriptions given by Rowe and Frewer (2005, p. 254). A more in-depth review of social media potential is required to appreciate the opportunities that could be available. McNutt (2014) explores the role of social media and ways to use the technology at a level previously not considered. McNutt begins by illustrating that internet technology and social media is widely used by governments at a transactional level. While theories associated with new public management focused on marketing and business-driven models, McNutt (2014) states that governments must embrace a new approach to internet and social media technologies that promote a “communicative paradigm” (p. 50). A broad understanding of web 2.0 (as McNutt (2014) describes the approach) is needed to realize the benefits of using social media to promote public engagement. Web 2.0 is a transition that includes “Google usurping Netscape, blogs replacing personal websites, content management systems transformed into wikis and the shift from digital
highways to virtual communities” (McNutt, 2014, p. 52). Further, while web 1.0 was about modernizing traditional government processes, web 2.0 relates to “reorganization of governing processes and a greater embrace of participatory opportunities, collaboration, and openness” (McNutt, 2014, p. 52). McNutt (2014) goes further to identify specific social media utilities (Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Wikipedia) and recommends that governments must go to the social spaces to engage with its citizenry rather than asking the public to come to its sites. McNutt (2014) provides some positive examples of using social media in a web 2.0 environment:

- Crowdsourcing – an approach where a government puts forward a problem to its citizens and seeks solutions to that problem. The rewriting of the Icelandic constitution used crowdsourcing amidst the global economic meltdown in 2008.
- Co-production – an approach where the public is asked to provide quality, innovative solutions or, in the case of Apps4Ottawa, applications for portable devices in and around Ottawa (p. 60).

One of the most important elements described by McNutt (2014) in promoting use of social media in a web 2.0 environment is that the public sector must promote the institutional and cultural change required to embrace web 2.0. “Without a commitment to the ethos of openness, participation, and collaboration, there is very little reason to implement web 2.0 tools for web 1.0 purposes” (McNutt, 2014, p. 54). Epstein, Newhart and Vernon (2014) contribute to this discussion in that “technical solutions can leverage the affordances of the Internet to enable large scale public deliberation” (p. 337) when designed correctly.

2.4 Public Engagement Improvement Opportunities

Finding ways in which public engagement opportunities can be improved requires that public engagement, in the context of this research project, must be defined. Nabatchi and Amsler (2014) describe public engagement as an “umbrella term that encompasses numerous methods for bringing people together to address issues of public importance” (p. 63S). This definition does not, however, enable a local government to constructively develop a public engagement model or strategy. A more specific application of engagement or consultation is needed. As Rowe and Frewer (2005) establish in their presentation of the typology associated with public engagement, the following definition captures the essence of collaborative efforts: “the practice of involving members of the public in the agenda-setting, decision-making, and policy-forming activities of organizations/institutions responsible for policy development” (p. 253). While this definition is broad in that it describes the public as being involved at various levels, it captures the back and forth dialogue that is needed to develop workable solutions.

For local governments to find success in conducting public engagement, a clear definition as noted earlier is important. Similarly, local governments must find ways to develop a culture of awareness about public engagement’s potential, limitations, and key factors. Firmstone and Coleman (2015) acknowledge that failed efforts relate more to the process by which engagement occurs than the technology used or the topic at hand. The “process of engagement is far more important to success than the tools used to reach people” (p. 684) and the engagement practitioners (i.e. the local government staff) must understand this concept. Firmstone and Coleman (2015) also recognize that skills and tools must be provided to practitioners in order to deliver successful engagement (p.
Zhang and Liao (2011) describe how city managers who see value in public participation are more likely to promote use of two-way dialogue in decision making processes (p. 286). This acknowledgement of two-way dialogue is akin to the definition that Rowe and Frewer (2005) have for public participation (p. 255). To summarize how public engagement that is successful is supported by administrators, Zhang and Liao (2011) identify that managers who see public input as adding value to the decision-making process are more likely to find success in engagement strategies (p. 287).

The literature also identifies being coherent and organized as an opportunity for improving engagement strategies. Trust is built amongst the public when the engagement efforts are genuine, well-understood and the goals are communicated. Rather, public engagement that is disjointed, insubstantial or not fully considered leads to distrust and low participation rates. Firmstone and Coleman (2015) describe how successful engagement relates to the process of engagement (p. 684) rather than information dumps or one-way dialogues. Evidence also exists showing that feedback to the public on how their input is to be used leads to successful engagement. A local government’s reputation can be damaged when engagement is not coordinated or no plan exists for how to use public feedback or communicate results back to the public (Firmstone and Coleman, 2015, p. 690). The level of coordination and coherence in an engagement strategy also leads to a healthier civic environment; as Zhang and Liao (2011) describe, “municipalities with healthy politics are more likely to embrace two-way dialogue for public engagement … than those with less healthy politics in their government” (p. 298).

2.5 Local Government and Public Engagement in Canada

Local governments in Canada are in a unique position, both in time and in space. Under the Constitution Act (1982), the federal and provincial governments are defined as levels of government. Municipal and local governments however are not defined as such, and are thus creatures of the provinces. This situation, combined with pressures facing the public sector such as diminishing revenue sources and increased expectations by the public for services (Tindal, Tindal, Stewart & Smith, 2013, p. 22) are creating a need for enhanced public engagement. Tindal et al. (2013) expand on this concept by suggesting that local residents should be made “the heart of local government” (p. 24) to take advantage of the opportunities presented in contemporary society. Local governments are actually better placed than their federal and provincial counterparts to take advantage of a global market and reduced senior government services. Specific legislation can be created to enable local government activities and the “service sector oriented economy” (Tindal et al., 2013, p. 24) is dependent on urban areas, which are most directly associated with local governments. It is up to the local governments, themselves, to create the processes and environment in which public engagement can be effectively conducted.

Building on the concept that local governments operate within a legislative framework defined by senior governments, Schalk (2014) provides an overview of the resources available to local governments on a province by province basis. While all provinces have legislation that mandates civic engagement for their local governments, only three provided resources to assist with engagement efforts as of 2014 (p. 19). New Brunswick, Saskatchewan and Alberta each have guidebooks and reference material developed at a provincial level to support local government actions. Given that “the three Canadian jurisdictions that developed resources provide basic
information with little practical guidance on various citizen engagement topics” (Schalk, 2014, p. 20), this research project will benefit by a closer review of some specific public engagement activities in Canadian jurisdictions.

The central west region of Newfoundland provides numerous examples of public engagement. Mirza, Vodden and Collins (2012) describe the Miawpukek first nation band council (p. 21), the Grand Falls – Windsor “we can do it” campaign (p. 23) and community radio (p. 24) as programs/projects where effective public engagement was conducted. The practices are well developed, can be scaled across a variety of audiences depending on levels of importance and complexity and promote community spirit. Other examples of public engagement in Canada come from Schalk (2014) as he describes the status of public engagement policies and practices in Victoria, Saskatoon, St. Johns and many other communities (p. 32). A common theme from these examples is the existence of policy at the local government level that incorporates a public engagement framework and methodology such as the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum of public participation (IAP2 Canada, 2015).

This section of the literature review culminates with reference to Don Lenihan’s Rescuing Policy: The case for public engagement (2012). This publication describes a variety of elements associated with public engagement in Canada and provides concrete recommendations for implementing public engagement. Lenihan (2012) acknowledges that public engagement must be undertaken by federal and provincial levels of government, however encourages local governments to establish policy, undertake pilot projects and work with other governments as well as the private and non-profit sectors (p. 146).

2.6 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework provides this research project with focus and intent. It is developed and presented to enable the researcher and the project’s audience with a clear understanding of the fundamental purpose of the research.

This research project addresses the question “what are the best tools and methods to most effectively and efficiently engage the public on local service delivery in the Comox Valley Regional District?” The conceptual framework for this project (figure 1 and in appendix A) guides the researcher to maintain a focus on the question at hand. In describing the conceptual framework, a literature review was conducted with topic areas being basic elements and principles of engagement, technology and opportunities for improvement. The literature review is complemented by the following data gathering approaches:

- a series of semi-structured interviews with Comox Valley Regional District staff and staff from five other British Columbia local governments; and
- a document research review on the participating local government’s websites.

Collectively, the literature review and complementary yet distinct sets of research yield a breadth of knowledge on public engagement that can be described as promising practices and learning opportunities. As the conceptual framework shows, the promising practices and learning opportunities provide the overarching themes and structure for the project deliverables, being the
public engagement model / strategies and the implementation and assessment frameworks. Ultimately, these deliverables will enable local governments to be more effective and efficient in their public engagement actions and thereby enhance the delivery of their services.

2.7 Conclusion

This literature review explored themes associated with public engagement including the basic elements and principles of engagement, use of technology and areas that local governments can improve their engagement efforts. Finally, a conceptual framework that integrates the literature review with the master’s project was provided. As noted in this report, the literature review does not delve into the more specific outreach activities and practices. This is a gap in knowledge that could be further understood if the local governments choose to explore specific practices such as crowdsourcing or citizen juries, for example. The literature review findings can now be used as a foundational element for the high-level internet research and semi-structured interviews that are described in the following methodology and methods section.
3.0 Methodology and Methods

This chapter describes the methodology and methods for this research project, which received approval from the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board on March 31, 2016 (ethics protocol number 16-079).

3.1 Methodology

The research methodology for this master’s project is primarily qualitative in nature and seeks to understand the promising practices employed by various jurisdictions, the pitfalls to be avoided as a result of others’ experiences, and the most opportune formats of outreach and engagement for the Comox Valley Regional District and other local governments to undertake. The research uses a combination of methods to obtain the qualitative data, including a comparative assessment of the policies and practices from multiple jurisdictions and identification of promising practices within the literature and amongst the jurisdictions participating in the interviews.

The report identifies current public engagement experiences at the CVRD and describes preferred opportunities for the CVRD, which assists in focusing where to direct efforts for the CVRD. This exercise can be described as a gap analysis and as Whitney (2012) describes, a gap analysis compares the current state of a project or situation, identifies where the project should be and describes the steps required to “move the project from a current state to a desired state” (p. 0).

The report also provides the CVRD with opportunities to implement certain engagement activities when specific conditions exist, thereby advancing the CVRD to the preferred future state.

The identification of promising practices will build upon the learnings from the literature review and research across multiple jurisdictions. This qualitative approach is in part described by Sadovnik (2007, p. 421) as ‘action research’ and involves the researcher being an active participant in the process, seeking to understand why some elements work whereas other elements are less successful. The ‘action’ component of this research related to the interviews between the project author staff members at the CVRD and participating local governments. During these interviews, which are described in more detail in section 3.2, the semi-structured questions led to a deeper understanding of engagement practices, results and outcomes. Before more fully describing the methods and tasks undertaken in this research project, a clear definition of promising practices is needed. Dare Mighty Things, Inc. (n.d.) describes promising practices as “a program, activity or strategy that has worked within one organization and shows promise during its early stages for becoming a best practice with long term sustainable impact” (p. 4). Promising practices must also be objective or measuring purposes and also must “have the potential for replication among other organization” (p. 4).”

3.2 Methods and Tasks

All local governments in British Columbia must follow certain prescriptive elements of the Local Government Act (2015) and the Community Charter (2003) and using experiences from certain local governments will provide data on public outreach in this project. In addition to the CVRD, the following local governments are included in this master’s project:
• Metro Vancouver (2016);
• City of Victoria (2016);
• Capital Regional District (2016); and
• Regional District of Nanaimo (2016).

These jurisdictions were chosen as interviewees for this project because their services are consistent with CVRD services, the project author has specific knowledge of the jurisdictions and anecdotal evidence suggests the jurisdictions’ promising practices would be relevant to building a CVRD public engagement program.

Similarly, many local governments experience problems with service delivery and can provide relevant information on public outreach failures in terms of lessons learned and how to overcome barriers and challenges. Initially, staff from the District of Saanich and the Cowichan Valley Regional District were also requested to participate in this master’s project. Responses from these two local governments did not lead to interviews.

3.2.1 Website Analysis and Document Review

The data received through the interviews is complemented with research conducted on the websites of the local governments that participated in the interviews. In order to be consistent and organized during this component of the qualitative research, a series of questions were posed while the website research was conducted (appendix B). The questions focused on the presence of public engagement sites, the purpose identified for the sites and the use of new or emerging technology that is promoted on the site.

The results of the document review were analyzed and incorporated into the findings from the key informant interviews. As Flick (2007) describes, the research design must be narrow in focus to encourage a strong focus on the goals associated with the project. In this instance, the document review explores the concepts and components of public engagement at participating governments, maintaining a narrow focus that aligns with the conceptual framework for this master’s project.

Flick further notes that “a good research design is a precondition for breaking down a complex issue of research and a broad interest in this issue to something that can be managed in an (always) limited time with (always) limited resources and can lead to a relevant approach and results” (p. 44).

3.2.2 Key Informant Interviews

In addition to the webpage research and document review, data collection was primarily achieved through a series of interviews with local government practitioners. Semi-structured questions were used to guide the interview process. Semi-structured interviews enable a researcher to set out a series of questions that guide a conversation along a series of topics. The researcher is guided by the question set so as to not stray far from the research questions; however, the semi-structured nature of the questions provided flexibility to explore topics that can contribute to the overall learning associated with the research (Rabionet, 2011). The data collection for the key informant interviews included semi-structured questions with certain jurisdictions in which to explore the
successes and failures associated with public outreach. Attached as appendix B is a copy of the questions used in the semi-structured interviews.

In developing the semi-structured questions, the literature review findings provide a foundation upon which the interviews were conducted.

The four local governments that did participate in this project and the four CVRD staff members who participated in interviews all provided substantive responses to the questions asked. The interviews included theoretical discussions on promising practices and experiential discussions on the best and worst approaches to engagement. Given the breadth of professional experience contained within the interviewees’ backgrounds, a broad set of data was garnered through the interviews.

The specific research tasks for this master’s project included, in order of occurrence:

- confirmation with the following jurisdictions that one interview could be conducted with a communications / outreach staff member and advising that research on their website will be conducted for this project: Metro Vancouver, the City of Victoria, the Capital Regional District and the Regional District of Nanaimo. Four separate interviews and internet research were also conducted with the Comox Valley Regional District. One staff member from both the District of Saanich and the Cowichan Valley Regional District were also asked to participate in this research project however responses were not conducive to continue engaging with these local governments;
- outreach to identified jurisdictions to seek a willing participant who is in a capacity to provide answers and context on public engagement activities;
- interview questions are developed that offer a balance between rigor and flexibility;
- high-level research on participating jurisdictions’ websites for public surveys, service delivery models, social media as a means of communication and other materials that either support outreach or are the result of outreach efforts;
- conduct interviews with participants;
- conduct follow-up research on participating jurisdictions’ websites to obtain additional material that becomes evident following interviews; and
- compile interview responses to illustrate successes and failures including references to obtained materials.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted in two separate instances for this master’s project: the internet research findings were analyzed using thematic or document analysis (Bowen, 2009, p. 28 and Marshall and Rossman, 2006, p. 107); and the interview findings were analyzed using a content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). As Bowen (2009) describes, document analysis “is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating documents—both printed and electronic (computer-based and Internet-transmitted) material” (p. 27). The document analysis is appropriate for the webpage research in that a consistent and managed approach to the research and analysis is offered.
The content analysis of the interviews similarly built on the literature review findings as those findings were compared with the themes, commentary and experiences from the participating jurisdictions. Detailed notes from each of the interviews were analyzed, from which lists were generated that codes the data where similarities arise amongst the participating jurisdictions. This approach to content analysis is described by Hsieh and Shannon (2005) as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (p. 1278). As with many qualitative research projects, the application of these different analytical techniques is blended and triangulated to find patterns and results in the data.

This data analysis provided evidence that generally supported the findings in the literature review. The findings illustrate the practices occurring amongst the participating jurisdictions and enable this master’s project to highlight opportunities for the CVRD to promote its engagement efforts.

3.4 Project Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations for this master’s project are associated with the breadth of the literature review and the range of opportunities that exist for public participation. The literature review focused on public participation and local government, omitting much documentation associated with public participation and other levels of government or policy areas. This project intends to provide support and guidance to local governments that are planning to improve their public engagement efforts. Therefore, the literature review focused on public engagement processes and theories relevant to local governments.

The project is also limited in that the deliverable for this project is a scan of public engagement methods and tools providing the CVRD with a variety of public engagement options based on promising practices from literature and other jurisdictions. The scan identifies tools that align with the Public Participation Spectrum (IAP2 Canada, 2015). A cursory review of the spectrum does reveal engagement techniques ranging from fact sheets and open houses to participatory decision-making and citizen juries. This project, however, does not deeply explore these particular techniques, as that kind of research and analysis could constitute a master’s project on its own.

Social media is identified in the academic articles and contemporary research as a promising and ever-evolving engagement technique. This project is limited in that specific attention on social media initiatives is minimal.
4.0 Findings

This findings section reports on the semi-structured interviews conducted with local government practitioners and the website research that sought examples of public outreach. These findings also reference the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum of engagement activities.

As noted in the introduction to this project, the spectrum categorizes engagement along a continuum from passive to active and from informed to empowered. One end of the spectrum (inform) identifies a one-way conversation where the audience is informed through advertisements or newsletters and the spectrum’s other end (empower) describes efforts such as voting, citizen juries and delegated decisions. The spectrum is reproduced here in Table 1 for reference and includes descriptions for each level of the spectrum for the public participation goal and for the promise to the public (IAP2, 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INFORM</th>
<th>CONSULT</th>
<th>INVOLVE</th>
<th>COLLABORATE</th>
<th>EMPOWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public participation goal</td>
<td>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.</td>
<td>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.</td>
<td>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.</td>
<td>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promise to the public</td>
<td>We will keep you informed.</td>
<td>We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.</td>
<td>We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.</td>
<td>We will implement what you decide.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – IAP2 spectrum of public participation

The findings section begins by describing the current state of public engagement at the Comox Valley Regional District. A brief summary of the outreach efforts, tools available, strategies and policies is offered, based in part on the semi-structured interviews and the website research. The section then describes the results of the interviews and research with other local governments. Promising practices are identified, as are pitfalls and principles that should be understood in developing a public engagement program.
4.1 Current State – Comox Valley Regional District Interviews and Research

The Comox Valley Regional District conducts public outreach and communications in a variety of manners, using a range of platforms and resulting in a mixture of results. Recreation, parks, planning, engineering and finance departments all engage with the public. Some contact is face-to-face at open houses or at the sports and aquatic centres, other contact is through letters and utility bills and some contact is online. Information is delivered to the public in a one-way push in some instances while other times feedback is sought to develop policy or gauge interest in new programs. This section describes the unofficial policy framework that guides public engagement at the CVRD and then explores many of the practices described in the semi-structured interviews, which occurred during April and May 2016.

4.1.1 Policy Framework

The CVRD has a variety of formal and informal engagement activities that staff undertake. When asked about a formal public engagement framework, which means a set of policies or guiding documents that set parameters for staff, elected officials and the public involved in engagement, staff were mixed on answers. Some interviewees felt that the set of statutory consultation actions, including posting legal notices or informing neighbours about a development proposal or conducting public hearings, constituted a formal engagement framework. Other staff were clear that no formal framework exists at the CVRD. Indeed, a scan of the CVRD website and social media pages (such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube) does not identify a formal framework or policy.

The CVRD board adopts policies on occasion and a review of the ‘governance / regional district board / board policies’ webpage provides links to policies that cover topics including elected official conduct, effective relationships, bylaw enforcement and financial planning. Taken from the CVRD’s website, “some of the reasons that the board may set policy include:

- Assurance for the public that decisions the board makes are consistent, stable and continuous;
- Separation is clearly articulated between the role of elected officials in setting policy and the role of staff in implementing and carrying out policy;
- Time and effort by the public, staff and the board of directors can be saved by providing clarity on what strategic direction the board desires to follow;
- The board is able to show leadership on important issues; and
- The public and special purpose groups have a clear understanding of the board's position on certain matters” (CVRD, 2015)

With these principles identified, the CVRD may be well advised to consider a formal engagement framework. However, where the CVRD lacks in a formal engagement framework, it would appear to make up the difference with on-the-ground experiences.

Interviews were conducted with four staff members from the CVRD during April and May 2016. Many examples of outreach were identified through these interviews and some key opportunities for improvement were suggested. In all instances, the range of outreach is extensive. Current and long range planning gave examples such as providing formal notices to neighbours of proposed
developments and conducting public hearings; engineering services identified community open houses and drop-in office hours where the public can ask questions and discuss technical aspects of ongoing projects; and parks related the informal discussions in the field with volunteer user groups, who most often volunteer their time at parks in close proximity to their own homes.

4.1.2 Successful Experiences

When asked about the most successful example of outreach at the CVRD, the manager of planning services described the official community plan (OCP) review process that preceded the rural Comox Valley OCP adoption in November 2014. Given that the Local Government Act requires that consultation be undertaken when developing and/or reviewing an OCP, the CVRD developed a strategy to engage the public to help set the policy direction for the OCP. The manager of planning services recalled the colourful postcards that were mailed to each residence in the rural areas. The postcards provided some insight to the OCP review and encouraged the public to participate by attending open houses and submitting comments in hardcopy and online. The unaddressed bulk mail feature from Canada Post was used to send out the post cards, which is not as targeted as using addressed mail, however, as the manager of planning services states, “it was an easy way to get a lot of information out to a lot of people and we did get quite a lot of phone calls and emails.” The post cards provided an opening for the public to connect directly with staff.

The manager for the south sewer project provided another example where the public engagement efforts used seem to have been effective. The manager described the intent to carry messages about the project across many media formats. Newspapers, the CVRD website, social media, addressed newsletters, PlaceSpeak and open houses were all strategies used to communicate efforts associated with the project and also to request public input on project elements. In fact, the manager indicates that often the print and online outreach all funnel towards an open house; and attendance was high at open houses (more than 200 people attending from a population of just over 2,000 – a turnout of ten percent is a commendable figure considering the voter turnout at the 2014 local government elections for the CVRD electoral areas was 27 percent (CVRD, 2015)).

Community parks at the CVRD are highly valued, well attended and spark significant interest amongst the public. The manager of parks recognizes these attributes and uses volunteers to gather information for “developing strategic priorities and site specific management plans.” The manager also recognizes that many parks volunteers donate their time on parks and greenways that are in close proximity to their own homes. The vested interest these volunteers have in seeing a positive local parks experience is an asset to the CVRD as it develops and implements its plans. The manager of parks also illustrated the success of going to the public at farmers markets, community gatherings and in parks themselves. In-park surveys prove particularly successful when planned for times where a range of visitor-types (local and distant for example) are visiting the parks.

4.1.3 Opportunities for Learning

Despite the successes provided by CVRD staff during interviews, many examples of engagement that did not achieve certain goals were provided. These examples can also be used to illustrate some pitfalls to avoid during an engagement strategy. In a community planning setting, a situation was described where an open house is conducted by the developer. Local government planning
staff may or may not attend, and in the example provided, the developer may not entirely understand the process required to guide the development proposal from start to finish.

In a parks setting, engagement without a specific goal or purpose can be problematic. As the manager of parks suggested, outreach is sometimes conducted to ensure that staff can indicate to the public that some effort to engage the public was made. This rarely leads to a valuable set of inputs or goals being achieved. Caution was also expressed not to assume that any one engagement tactic will lead to consultation success – “a pitfall is to assume you’ll be 100% successful with consultation.”

The manager of the south sewer project described similar examples where efforts to conduct public engagement are not well articulated or planned. One example provided during the interview was of an open house where a microphone was provided for members of the public to ask questions or raise concerns. During the open house, one member of the public felt compelled to use the microphone for his personal stage to lambast the project and criticize staffing efforts.

4.1.4 Technology

The interviews discussed some of the technological trends in local government as social media becomes increasingly widespread. Generally, the perception amongst those interviewed was that members of the public have more information available to them than in the past. Data, reports and opinions are widely available and easily distributed during project development. There is also a general sense that the public expects local governments to respond more frequently to questions posed. Staff did routinely identify the challenges with, not only the speed at which responses are expected, but also with providing accurate and timely information to posed questions. Staff also identified that face-to-face meetings with people were preferable to soliciting information through online surveys, email or comment sheets.

From a technological perspective, opportunities were identified in a community planning setting where three-dimensional models can be used to illustrate proposed developments. In the past, building accurate models out of foam blocks and paint took time and were costly. With computer models now available, roads can be routed and site lines illustrated less expensively than before. Specific software packages that focus conversations to a community or neighbourhood level were also identified as a recent technological opportunity. The actual success of using these types of software was not specifically identified, however, given the projects using the software are ongoing.

4.2 Promising Practices

The website research and the semi-structured interviews conducted for this master’s project introduced a variety of promising practices, principles, strategies and examples that can be incorporated into a comprehensive public engagement model. Input provided by the interviewees from the Capital Regional District, City of Victoria, Regional District of Nanaimo and Metro Vancouver ranged from specific examples of positive engagement efforts to problematic instances where decisions have gone astray. The website findings illustrated some common themes among participating local governments as well as highlighting examples where a higher degree of
attention could be paid to achieve a website that is more user-friendly and could achieve goals in a more direct manner. This section identifies the promising practices pulled from the interviews and research. The promising practices are categorized into the strong foundations and principles common in many participating local governments, the opportunities associated with technological advances, the importance of accessing the community and developing strong relationships. The section concludes with strategies from each jurisdiction for enhancing the positive outcomes that can be derived from public engagement.

4.2.1 Strong Foundations and Principles

A common theme evident in all of the interviews with local government practitioners was the need for a strong foundation and strong principles from which engagement activities emanate. This foundation was illustrated most prominently in:

- the local governments’ reference to the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) as a basis for both understanding public engagement as well as applying engagement practices; and
- building communication strategies that target a broad audience.

The CRD, City of Victoria and RDN all use the IAP2 in daily activities and consider the IAP2 as a fundamental component when designing engagement strategies. The CRD provides its “Public Participation Framework” (CRD, n.d.), the City of Victoria describes engagement in its “Civic Engagement” report (City of Victoria, 2012) and the RDN links to its reference material titled “A Coordinated Public Consultation/Communication Framework 2008” (RDN, 2008), each of which promotes the IAP2 as foundational to their engagement efforts. The City of Victoria and the CRD also use a centralized communications model in their operations. This means that the communications departments work closely with the operational departments, such as public works, parks, planning or recreation, as decisions are made to implement projects. The communications departments then work to educate the operational staff on the merits of the IAP2 spectrum and design communication strategies that maximize the engagement efforts. Specific goals for outreach are identified with operational staff, and the point along the IAP2 spectrum that matches those goals becomes the focus for engagement efforts. The fundamental elements of the IAP2 spectrum are also communicated with the elected officials and the public at large to ensure a common understanding of the IAP2 purpose. The City of Victoria pays particular attention to ensuring the public understands the level of engagement (along the IAP2 spectrum) that is being used in a project such that awareness exists about how input will or will not be used. This learning process by the public is gradual however applying the IAP2 in a consistent approach assists with a common understanding.

Another key component to having a strong foundation from which public engagement emanates is the strategy to target a broad audience. The RDN, City of Victoria, Metro Vancouver and CRD all state that a robust engagement strategy must use a variety of means by which to conduct engagement. When asked which tools of a spectrum are used in engagement, answers included a diverse list including newsletters, personalized letters, flyers, web posts, social media posts, newspaper articles, open houses, living room meetings, public hearings, public speaking periods at council or board meetings and purposeful discussions on street corners. While this range of
engagement techniques was not always evident on local government websites, the key point is that employing a range of engagement activities will increase the likelihood of engaging with more members of the public. Metro Vancouver recognizes the importance of this and makes specific efforts to communicate directly with school age children in the classroom, community groups at neighbourhood events, businesses at boards of trade and environmental organizations at annual general meetings. These efforts are in addition to maintaining an informative website and communicating via more traditional means such as newspaper ads or telephone surveys. The RDN also promotes a range of outreach methods such as attending community fairs and farmers markets to discuss policy and programming initiatives with the public. As Geoff Garbutt identifies, the RDN “likes to see face-to-face communication with staff going to groups or individuals. We do the residents’ associations, parents’ advisory committees, booths at the mall, fall fair, farmers’ market. The face-to-face conversations give excellent feedback.”

4.2.2 Opportunities with Technology

During the semi-structured interviews, focus was given to the impact of technology on public participation, including the prevalence of social media in contemporary society. All interviewees were asked specifically about the role that technology is playing on engagement efforts as well as trends that are being experienced. Most interviewees perceive technology as a positive force that promotes participation by more people than in the past. The access to information via social media sites, topical web sites, research forums and citizen journalists is easier than in the past and more people can develop materials for a more broad audience.

Katie Hamilton, the director of civic engagement and strategic planning for the City of Victoria, provided an example of using technology to boost public participation in a dramatic fashion. In the past, the City of Victoria followed a traditional approach to strategic planning and budget setting and the strategic planning process was not directly related to budget setting during an annual cycle. Strategic planning for the council and city was conducted outside of the context of a financial plan and as such the members of the public who participated in strategic planning sessions did not observe how their perspectives were incorporated into the government’s budget. More recently, as Ms. Hamilton identifies, strategic planning aligns directly into budget setting, enabling members of the public to see that their contributions are influencing the operational and capital budgets. Technology is heavily used in this process through an online town hall format. Members of the public can “email questions to their elected officials from the comfort of their pajamas while drinking a cup of coffee at home,” says Ms. Hamilton. The questions are received in real-time during council meetings and answers provided on the spot. The addition of online town hall meetings and the alignment of strategic planning and budget setting has increased public participation for a $200 million budget. Participation used to be less than 100 people however those numbers have recently increased to between two and three thousand people.

Social media was also referenced by all participants during the interviews and all websites that were researched provided links to common social media pages. Social media, including sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, has become very popular and many residents participate on these sites many times each day. This requires local governments to not only be aware of the technology but also to find ways for promoting their own activities via social media. Most interviewees to this master’s project advised that their local governments have an active
social media presence. Involvement ranges amongst the interviewees, seemingly dependent on the level of resources available to engage. Given that many social media platforms provide the opportunities for a conversation, rather than a one-way push of information that traditional websites provide, the use of social media by governments require resources to carry out those conversations. An example of real-time social media tools being used for a positive effect occurs in Metro Vancouver. Simon Cumming describes the use software during conferences where conference attendees can post comments about presentations to a webfeed that are then displayed on a screen while the presentation is being given. Attendees can make additional comments to the original posts and vote on preferred topics or promote new or different ideas. The conference can be tailored very specifically to the audience’s needs or interests. While this requires diligent attention and flexibility by the conference organizers, the conference is very responsive and participation rates are high. The use of technology in this manner also provides for interesting opportunities in a daily, societal context, beyond the conference space.

4.2.3 Community Access / Relationships

One of the questions during the semi-structured interviews related to successful engagement experiences. A common response given by many of the respondents was the importance of relationships at an individual level and also at a community level.

Simon Cumming, from Metro Vancouver, describes the regional district as a utility provider, and highlighted the importance of being in the community and fostering positive relationships. Dedicated efforts are made to build connections with boards of trade and school districts alike. Relationships are fostered at the business levels and also through students from kindergarten to grade 12. This is an important aspect for the regional district in that the positive awareness that is generated during school events or community fairs gives the public a perspective of Metro that is based on trust and providing necessary services. Then, should Metro have to engage with the public on a more controversial topic, a base level of comprehension about Metro already exists with the public. Mr. Cumming anticipates that the base comprehension enables Metro to use its trust to make promises to the public on service delivery. The key, however, for Metro Vancouver is to ensure it can deliver on those promises. From Mr. Cumming’s perspective, the alternative of not having a base level of comprehension with the public, generated during trade fairs or school events, means that Metro Vancouver would be operating in a defensive, reactionary perspective when it introduces the more controversial projects.

The Regional District of Nanaimo also promotes the importance of developing relationships with the public. Geoff Garbutt described a planning process in a rural, unincorporated community that had not previously had zoning, building regulations or other conditions on land use that is generally common in urban settings. The RDN was interested in developing such regulations in response to public interest and also to promote growth practices more consistent with other parts of the regional district. The local area planning exercise that resulted was expected to be met with a negative reaction given the history of local government being absent in the area. The public engagement design that was developed for the process included the physical presence of the RDN in the community. A satellite office was opened in the area and planning staff were routinely available with an open-door policy for the public to speak with planning staff on topics relevant to the community. As Mr. Garbutt notes, the public appreciated the opportunities to have face-to-face
conversations about daily activities in the area and felt the RDN was more personable as a result. A telephone call to a head office, whether that head office is in Nanaimo, Victoria or Ottawa, did not appear to be as effective as an in-person conversation right in a person’s own community. The relationships that were built proved effective when the RDN finally proposed and implemented new land use regulations for the area.

4.2.4 Strategies for Positive Outcomes

During the interviews, all respondents were asked for a list of strategies for conducting positive engagement, which incorporates high participation rates and well-supported decisions. Responses ranged from defining a clear engagement purpose to understanding the audience to having clear information at the outset.

The City of Victoria expressed interest in developing background material that could be understood by a broad audience at a level that was not overly technical nor too simplistic. Avoiding jargon, techno-speak and narrowly focused commentaries can make background information more accessible. Public engagement is difficult to conduct when background information is inconsistent, not easily understood or unavailable. Victoria promotes the development of appropriate materials well ahead of approaching the public on its projects.

The RDN respects the importance of spending the time to develop a clear and coherent strategy for engaging the public. Recognizing where the public can add value to the process is also important in order that expectations by both the public and the local government are understood. These steps require time and resources before any public engagement can begin, however Mr. Garbutt notes that putting in time to design a process that describes necessary resources, timelines and outcomes will deliver products that can be used to make better decisions.

The Capital Regional District also described the importance of clearly understanding roles during an engagement effort. One practice that is consistently used by Andy Orr is the distribution of a graphical representation of the engagement effort, clearly identifying where input is sought and where decisions are made. This effort speaks to ensuring that the various parties in a public engagement activity understand their different roles.

As part of the website research, a question considered during research related to the ease of access and opportunities to increase public participation. Two common themes that emerged from this research were a) the use of graphics while minimizing text and b) consistency. Navigation and accessibility on websites that provided information in short statements while linking to pictures or infographics was conducive to further research whereas websites that contained extensive text were more difficult to navigate and reduced the level of attention a web visitor might have. Further, web pages within a site that had a consistent look and feel with respect to location of buttons, common phrases and layout were more conducive to further engagement than a site that had a variety of layouts on different pages. For example, the CRD (2016) provides a map, table of key information, related links, and a brief description of each project listed on its capital projects page. The effect of having that consistent information on each page promotes a level of familiarity with the project that engenders a higher level of awareness for the project and increases the engagement that could follow.
4.3 Summary

The interviews conducted with public sector practitioners, both at the Comox Valley Regional District and with other local governments, illuminated the current state of engagement and promising practices available for future efforts. Analyzing the actions and experiences provides valuable information about what efforts should be more understood in order that engagement achieves the goals that are set out for achieving.
5.0 Discussion and Analysis

This discussion and analysis integrates the literature review findings, semi-structured interview input and website research to address the research question, which is restated here as: “what are the best tools and methods to most effectively and efficiently engage the public on local government service delivery in the Comox Valley Regional District?” This section also draws from the conceptual framework to highlight appropriate tools and methods for local governments practicing public engagement. The key themes explored further in this section centre on public engagement that is purposeful, organized and genuine. These principles can be the foundation from which engagement activities can be implemented.

The following three themes, which are to “be purposeful”, “be organized” and “be genuine”, are not specifically referenced in the literature review, nor explicitly stated through the interviews or on the local governments’ websites. However, undercurrents related to these themes were evident throughout the research. The research shows these themes in sometimes abstract ways, and as will be illustrated in this discussion and analysis section, relating these abstract concepts to day-to-day settings helps to make public engagement tools more practical to local government staff, elected officials and the public.

5.1 Be Purposeful

A common theme echoed by the CVRD staff and the other local government practitioners who participated in the interviews was the importance of knowing the reasons for conducting engagement. The literature further supports this concept by describing the importance of having a well-designed engagement strategy.

One of the foundational elements of being purposeful with engagement is a sound understanding of the IAP2 framework and applying it to real situations. The IAP2 spectrum allows users, being the local government staff and/or elected officials, to determine the role that public engagement is to take: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower. From this determination, a series of methods for engaging can be chosen by the user. Table 2 illustrates many of the common engagement methods, drawn from the IAP2 spectrum (IAP2, 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example techniques</th>
<th>INFORM</th>
<th>CONSULT</th>
<th>INVOLVE</th>
<th>COLLABORATE</th>
<th>EMPOWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- Fact sheets</td>
<td>- Public comments</td>
<td>- Workshops</td>
<td>- Citizen advisory committees</td>
<td>- Citizen juries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Web sites</td>
<td>- Focus groups</td>
<td>- Deliberative polling</td>
<td>- Consensus-building</td>
<td>- Ballots</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Open houses</td>
<td>- Surveys</td>
<td>- Participatory decision-making</td>
<td>- Delegated decisions</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 – IAP2 common engagement methods
This purposeful selection of engagement methods helps to ensure that the efforts to engage result in an outcome that is desired. For example, if the local government project under consideration relates to selecting a community drinking water treatment system and public engagement is desired to educate the public and identify preferences within a specific set of parameters associated to siting and costs, the practitioners may select the inform and consult roles from the IAP2 spectrum. The available engagement methods then become evident as being newsletters, backgrounder materials, open houses, surveys and paid advertising. The input gathered during this engagement can then be used to ensure the public understands the water treatment technology being considered as well as narrowing down the focus of discussion associated with siting and costs. Without a purposeful approach to engagement, the local government practitioners could choose an engagement method that is not suitable for the desired goals. A referendum or citizen jury, for example, would put more emphasis on public input than is desired for this particular project.

The importance of being purposeful can be illustrated by a second example that considers a project that should engage the public in a more comprehensive manner. Developing a policy on solid waste management that requires input about public preferences for recycling and reusing materials may result in a referendum where the public is asked to make decisions for the future. This project may actually require that most of the IAP2 roles are incorporated into the public engagement plan. Table 3 illustrates the IAP2 roles and specific engagement tactics for each in a project such as developing a waste management plan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IAP2 Role</th>
<th>ENGAGEMENT TACTIC</th>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inform</td>
<td>Backgrounders, briefing notes, website pages, newsletters</td>
<td>To provide background information about the project, options, process and decision-making points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consult</td>
<td>Public meetings, surveys</td>
<td>To solicit feedback on potential service delivery methods, educate in a face-to-face setting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involve</td>
<td>Workshops</td>
<td>To strategize with public on selecting preferred waste disposal technologies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collaborate</td>
<td>Consensus-building</td>
<td>To have public bring common issues to the table, deliberate on positive and negative attributes and find solutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empower</td>
<td>Referendum</td>
<td>To approve borrowing funds for capital projects</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 - Sample engagement tactics for developing a solid waste management plan

A purposeful approach to public engagement can focus the attention of staff, elected officials and the public. The examples provided in this section illustrate the manner in which a dedicated and purposeful approach to engagement can achieve the desired results. By understanding the goals for engagement, the process itself becomes more supported and supportable.

5.2 Be Organized
As second theme that is evident through the literature review, interviews and research is the importance of being organized. An unorganized public engagement process can be seen to be disjointed, lacking purpose and ineffective. On the contrary, an organized approach uses resources effectively, seeks to achieve goals in a deliberative manner and is seen to bring parties together to find solutions.

Being organized involves developing a plan. Geoff Garbutt, general manager of strategic and community development from the Regional District of Nanaimo, described the process that all staff are to use anytime they introduce projects to the board. The staff who are leading the project pull together the various internal staff members who have interests in the project. Typically, a project team includes representatives from finance, human resources, administration and communications, including the project lead, who comes from parks, engineering, planning or another department. The communications representative then develops the communications plan or public engagement plan and a variety of factors are described, including how and when outreach occurs, the goals for each point of outreach and the resources required to action these steps. Plans to address risks or threats to the project should also be developed, minimizing problems that might occur. One final point in regards to developing a public engagement plan is that by doing so early in a project’s life cycle, the outreach components are prepared in a proactive manner to address specific goals. Without a public engagement plan, the project itself is often operating in a reactive sense as issues arise.

When a public engagement plan is developed, the importance of communicating that plan with the involved parties cannot be overstated. By advising the public or elected officials about the level or type of outreach, expectations can be managed. Katie Hamilton at the City of Victoria described some challenges experienced when the public and elected officials and staff each had an understanding about an engagement process that differed from each other. Each party expected the public input to be used in different ways, resulting in a flawed process. The promise to the public about how public input would be used was broken, eroding some trust in the elected officials and creating implementation challenges for staff. By communicating the engagement plans with the various parties to the process, the project implementation can be more successful.

Being organized in regards to public engagement means doing what you say you are going to do, as described by Andy Orr from the Capital Regional District. Mr. Orr develops an infographic each time the CRD conducts formal engagement with the public to ensure that the parties understand the engagement approach being undertaken. By implementing the public engagement plan that was a) developed with input from the relevant parties to the project and b) publicly communicated to ensure all parties understand the process and how they fit into the process, the communications efforts are seen to be appropriate. Public trust can be enhanced when the plan to communicate is implemented and the public can realize their expectations about the process. One important element that should be understood during implementation is that plans can go awry. Many of the interviewees reflected on the problems that had arisen during engagement activities when surprises were injected into their processes. A well-organized public engagement plan integrates the unsuspected actions and provides for suitable responses. Flexibility while implementing a public engagement plan is important to ensure that plans are not derailed and that objectives can still be met.
The final component of an organized public engagement plan is to report on results. Much of the literature reviewed for this project, including Firmstone and Coleman (2015, p. 690), describes the importance of reporting to the decision-makers the feedback content or results of a process. Members of the public who take time and effort from their own lives to participate in a process deserve to see how their input is received. In a public hearing setting, presenting all public feedback to the decision-makers is crucial. In a referendum process, reporting on the actual results of ballots cast promotes transparency with the public. The same principles apply when a community advisory panel deliberates on an issue or a survey is conducted. The raw data that is used to develop a policy or build a budget should also be given to decision-makers.

5.3 Be Genuine

Being genuine is the final theme arrived at through the semi-structured interviews and research for this master’s project. A public engagement exercise that has a strong purpose and is well-organized must also be delivered in a genuine and truthful manner in order to be as successful as possible. Being genuine is constructed on a few key principles, and relies upon dedicated and thoughtful practitioners in order that set goals are achieved. Primarily, all parties involved in the process should understand and appreciate the reasons for conducting public engagement; and secondly the practitioners should approach engagement with a true sense of knowing the value for engagement and seeking to fulfil the mandate associated with engagement. This second principle is rooted in an organization’s culture.

When a public engagement process fails to deliver on its goals, a common reason given during the interviews for failure was the lack of dedicated supports, background information and awareness of the process. These reasons are related to a lack of planning and more specifically, a lack of education in regards to understanding roles and placing value on the public engagement process. Education can fill that void where staff, elected officials and the public make assumptions or create expectations about a process. By educating the parties in a public engagement process, common understanding of terms, timelines, resource availability and potential outcomes can be generated. Barnes and Mann (2011) described the importance of educating all parties in public engagement and states that improving skills “may be at least as important as providing new or sophisticated techniques developed by practitioners and consultants” (p. 62).

Where an organization or a community work together to build a common appreciation of the tools they use to advance processes and develop projects, a culture forms. The organizational culture for a local government helps to define how engagement occurs. For example, a culture that values public input and respects ideas or concepts that may be different than the status quo projects an appearance of being open and inclusive. This type of culture can be seen to be genuine in promoting public engagement, which can increase the degree to which the public participates in processes and provides input for decision-makers.

5.4 Summary

Analyzing the results of the semi-structured interviews and literature review has afforded a clear understanding of three fundamental goals that should be considered in public engagement. Being purposeful, organized and genuine provides for a well-balanced and thoughtful approach to
engaging with the public, regardless of the level or form that the engagement takes. A public engagement plan that has a defined purpose, accounts for intended and unintended effects and is seen to seek an effective outcome will achieve the goals it sets out for.
6.0 Options and Recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The purpose of this master’s project is to develop tools and options for improving public engagement for local government decision-making by conducting a literature review, high-level scan of specific local government websites and semi-structured interviews with local government staff. This section of the project presents the model for local government practitioners to determine the available and preferred methods for public engagement in a variety of scenarios. This section also identifies an implementation strategy for the model and introduces the concept of an assessment framework.

Implementing the public engagement model at the Comox Valley Regional District or any other local government is optional. The specific point in time where the public engagement model that is described in section 6.2 can be implemented depends on a variety of factors: resources (including people and committed dollars), political interest and topical issues that lend themselves to using this model. This research project introduces four options associated with public consultation:

**Option 1 - Maintain the status quo in regards to public consultation**: meaning that outreach and engagement efforts being conducted at the CVRD continue in the same manner as has always been done;

**Option 2 - Implement portions of the public engagement model**: certain elements of the model can be embraced and implemented or the implementation can be phased over a series of months or years as resources and opportunities present themselves. For this option to be successful, the implementation plan noted in section 6.3 should be customized to reflect the staged implementation timeframe;

**Option 3 - Implement the public engagement model in full**: this project describes the public engagement model (in section 6.2), implementation strategy for the model (section 6.3) and assessment framework (section 6.4);

**Option 4 - Research additional public engagement techniques**: this project acknowledges some of its limitations associated with the breadth and range of research conducted and also the limited development of some specific engagement techniques. The CVRD may opt to understand these topics in greater detail before the model is implemented or as some of its elements are applied to real-life situations.

Sections 6.2 to 6.4 describe the public engagement model, implementation strategy and assessment framework and is based on a full implementation of the model (option 3 above). The Comox Valley Regional District is recommended to proceed with option 3 (implement the public engagement model in full) to realize the benefits associated with purposeful, organized and genuine public engagement that will lead to better decisions being made and the more effective and efficient delivery of public services.
6.2  Public Engagement Model

From service delivery to policy development, local government elected officials and staff must balance a variety of elements associated with any local government project. The description of this model considers the following input elements and prompts the model users, whether they are elected officials or staff, to determine the value of each element. The suitable method of engagement is then identified through the model application. Appendix D to this report includes a series of user questions and response options for using this engagement model. It is important to note that this model requires the practitioners to work hard to identify the available options and modes of effort for an engagement exercise to be successful. In the same sense that engagement must be genuine, as noted under the analysis of this project, the effort put into developing the public engagement plan must also be genuine.

6.2.1 Input: Engagement Goals

The model user must understand the purpose of the engagement. Along the IAP2 spectrum of public engagement (2016), the following purposes for engagement exist: informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering. The user must be able to articulate the goals of engagement. If the goals are associated with advising the public about a new program or changes to regulations, the user might select inform as the goal of engagement. Conversely, if the user is seeking to establish new policy that aligns with community interests, then a more participatory goal at the involve or collaborate level may be appropriate. Some supplemental questions associated with engagement goals include the statutory requirements associated with the project. Public notices are required for a variety of local government activities, including the conduct of elections, disposing of land and developing or adopting certain bylaws.

6.2.2 Input: Timeframe

A key input to defining the public engagement is the timeframe in which the engagement must occur. Some questions that can help the user in this manner include:

- Is there a statutory deadline for this project?
- Are the timeframes for the project flexible, meaning that deliverables or goals can be adjusted depending on the level of engagement or findings associated with the project?
- Is the public participation aspect of this project being incorporated into the project at the beginning or is the engagement a reaction to some events that have created a heightened need for engagement?
- What other engagement activities are occurring during the same timeframe, in order that conflicts can be avoided?
- How much time is available to conduct various engagement activities?

The timeframe for engagement is very important and depends largely on the engagement purpose. For instance, where public involvement is needed to frame public policy, a greater amount of time should be made available versus a situation where the local government is simply informing the public of a new program or new regulations.
6.2.3 Input: Resources

The amount of resources available to the local government in delivering an engagement strategy will guide the types of actions that can occur. Use of certain types of technology, holding public meetings and being responsive to individual citizens may all be appropriate types of engagement for a particular project, however these actions can only be undertaken with the suitable resources in place. Two of the more fundamental factors associated with this input are human resources (staff availability) and financial resources (ability to hire external consultants or purchase certain goods to deliver engagement activities). As public participation is incorporated into project planning early in a project’s development, resources can be identified as integral to the project at an early stage. This approach enables the effective application of resources in a constructive manner. The alternative to this approach is to consider the resource requirements for effective public participation after a project budget is determined. This approach will likely mean that the assignment of resources for public participation is an afterthought and human or financial resources are not specifically dedicated to the project. As noted, the preferred approach is to consider the resource requirements for public participation during project planning stages and incorporate those requirements into the overall project plan and project budget.

6.2.4 Input: Audience

Understanding the audience of the intended public participation is very important to developing a successful strategy. In addition to identifying the specific members of the public, stakeholders, other public agencies or businesses, the model user needs to be aware of the potential audience that may not be anticipated. For example, the public sector may intend to address a particular issue with an individual neighbourhood or community. The result of this targeted outreach may identify to members of an adjacent neighbourhood that an opportunity exists for a similar program or service. The audience for that particular outreach, then, becomes broader, thereby potentially requiring additional attention. The audience of a local government service or program may be at a large scale and the impacts are lightly felt or the audience may be at a very small and focused scale with significant impacts.

6.2.5 Compiling Inputs

As shown in appendix D, the series of questions and available responses that could be posed to practitioners during the development of a public engagement plan begin to focus the purpose and organization for an outreach strategy. By having discussions with practitioners about the nature and scope of goals, timeframe, resources and audience, the draft public engagement plan begins to take shape. Appendix F provides a public engagement plan template. The key elements for an outreach strategy are included in this template.

6.3 Implementation Strategy

This section describes the implementation of the public engagement model described previously. Implementation is a sequential exercise in that each step builds on the previous actions. Appendix C describes the implementation in a graphical form.
The first requirement for implementation is education of staff and elected officials. Providing information about the common set of terms and phrases associated with public engagement will help to ensure that a shared understanding exists amongst practitioners and decision makers about engagement. This shared understanding is key to having an effective discussion and debate about public engagement. From this debate, common ground about how the local government can reach out, solicit input and collaborate with the public can be defined. This definition would partially form the public engagement policy for the local government.

Adopting a policy creates the clear and defined role for government in its service delivery efforts. The proposed public engagement policy shown in appendix E:

- describes the influence that the IAP2 spectrum on public engagement has on engagement practices;
- includes the importance of defining a purpose;
- respects the value of public input and participation; and
- illustrates the roles played by the public, elected officials and local government staff.

The policy also identifies the importance of building public engagement plans at the outset of an engagement activity.

Implementing the public engagement model requires ongoing education and training for practitioners, elected officials and the public at large. While all staff will benefit from overarching training about the IAP2 spectrum on public participation, specific staff can be identified for focused training as it relates to their areas of expertise. Further, elected officials must be provided a basic understanding of the spectrum and the forms of engagement available for different projects. As new projects are proposed to the elected officials, additional opportunities should be identified for educating on new or untried approaches. As Ms. Hamilton identifies, one goal for the communications team at the City of Victoria is to introduce a new engagement tool to council for each new project it embarks upon. The final ongoing education component relates to activities with the public at large. Opportunities should be sought for local government staff to share the root concepts for public engagement before an engagement exercise begins. As Mr. DeMarzo, manager of parks for the CVRD, suggests, an engagement effort should begin with general discussions and conversations about the approach, rather than getting into the details about a project too early.

6.4 Assessment Framework

Assessing the results or impact of the public engagement model is an important component of the overall program to identify effectiveness, report on the success of meeting goals and to identify where improvements can be made to the program. Should the public engagement model be implemented, in full or in phased components, an assessment framework needs to be developed. The framework would allow practitioners, elected officials and the public to understand how well the model is being used and provide for opportunities to enhance certain components. Future activities associated with the public engagement model could include the development of a robust summary / findings tool for engagement efforts that also acts as a mechanism to find further methods for improving engagement activities.
7.0 Conclusion

This master’s project sought to find the methods and tools available to local governments for engaging with the public to improve service delivery. Specifically, the research question asks “what are the best tools and methods to most effectively and efficiently engage the public on local government service delivery in the Comox Valley Regional District?” Through a combination of conducting the literature review, interviewing practitioners and analyzing the results, some key principles are developed to promote effective and efficient public engagement by local governments.

Conducting the literature review provided evidence for better engagement along a number of different themes that influence local governments. This report identifies the literature accessed during the research as falling into three categories: basic elements and principles of public engagement; public engagement and technology; and public engagement improvement opportunities. Basic elements include being clear with the public on the purpose for engaging and being genuine with the engagement that occurs. Rowe and Frewer (2005) provide a large sample of engagement techniques in their broadly referenced academic paper *A Typology of Public Engagement Mechanisms*. The technology identified through the literature review focused heavily on the internet, emerging trends associated with social media and the importance of local governments understanding the purpose and role of social media. The internet, social media and web 2.0 (McNutt, 2014) should not be used as mere notice boards to replicate historic engagement efforts. Maximizing technology in public engagement means that practitioners understand the purpose for engagement and how to best utilize the tools available. Local governments must support staff in training and education related to social media if it is to be used effectively. Improvements for local governments, as identified through the literature review, include developing a common understanding of terms and concepts such that all parties are working from the same page before engagement begins.

The methods and methodology used in this project are described earlier in this report. Primarily, the literature review is used to buttress a series of semi-structured interviews with local government practitioners (or staff) and high-level internet research of the participating local government websites. A staff member from each of the City of Victoria, Regional District of Nanaimo, Capital Regional District and Metro Vancouver as well as four staff members from the Comox Valley Regional District were interviewed for this project. Using a set of pre-defined questions (appendix B), the interviews explored concepts ranging from past experiences to frustrations as well as the promotion of promising practices in public engagement. Each interview was audio-recorded and a transcription of each was produced.

The interviews and research provided a wealth of information about experiences in a variety of local government settings as well as trends in public engagement. The interviews with CVRD staff provided evidence that described the current state of the CVRD public engagement efforts. Fundamentally, many positive engagement efforts are conducted routinely for a variety of projects ranging from parks management to land use planning to waste management. However, a
coordinated approach to public engagement at a corporate level appears to be lacking at the CVRD. No specific policies exist at the CVRD that define the corporate approach to public engagement. Despite this lack of a coordinating policy, many examples of positive public engagement are available. The interviews with staff from other local governments similarly provide a wide range of examples of positive and also negative outreach experiences. In summarizing these interviews, the report details the promising practices by other local governments in relation to the strong foundations employed by local governments, the use of technology and the importance of developing relationships in the community.

Analyzing the literature review and interview research findings presented three significant themes that can be applied to effective and efficient public engagement: being purposeful, being organized and being genuine. The discussion associated with being purposeful relates heavily to a solid understanding of the International Association of Public Participation spectrum of public participation (IAP2, 2016). Defining a project purpose leads directly into the next theme identified in the analysis, which is being organized. A well-organized plan can be widely-communicated, well-resourced and implemented with all parties aware of specific roles and responsibilities. Finally, by having a strong and clear purpose for engagement and a well-organized public engagement plan, public engagement can be implemented in a genuine manner. These three themes will promote positive and effective engagement for elected officials, practitioners and the public at large.

The literature review, interview findings and analysis help to form the public engagement model that is presented in section 6 of this report, thereby providing the tools and methods to most effectively and efficiently engage the public on local government service delivery in the Comox Valley Regional District and answer the research question for this master’s project. The model poses a series of questions to practitioners and develops a public engagement plan. With a clear purpose and highly organized implementation plan, the outreach component of service delivery can be seen as being genuine and effective.

The options that are included in section 6 of this report range from partial to full implementation of a public engagement policy and model to ongoing research to better understand specific engagement activities. The project also describes that a robust assessment framework should be developed for public engagement, depending on the level of implementation that is determined. This report recommends that the public engagement policy and model be fully implemented.
References


Local Government Act, Statutes of British Columbia. (2015). Retrieved from [http://bclaws.ca/civix/content/complete/statreg/76470131/15001_00d/?xsl=/templates/browsexsl](http://bclaws.ca/civix/content/complete/statreg/76470131/15001_00d/?xsl=/templates/browsexsl)


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Appendices

Appendix A – Conceptual framework

Appendix B – Questions used in semi-structured interviews with local government practitioners and questions posed through website research

Appendix C – Public engagement model implementation strategy graphic

Appendix D – Public engagement model overview

Appendix E – Public engagement policy

Appendix F – Public engagement plan template
Appendix B - Questions used in semi-structured interviews with local government practitioners and questions posed through website research

Semi-structured questions:
Introduction: thank you for participating in this research project. I anticipate that your input will provide valuable information towards developing a model and tools for local governments to conduct better public engagement. For the questions below, consider all of your experiences, both with your current employer and previous employers.

1. Tell me about your current role with your local government.

2. Tell me about how often and in what manner your position interacts with the public to gather input, share information, educate and find solutions.

3. What issues does your municipality consult the public on?
   a. How is this determined?

4. Is there one person in charge of public engagement?

5. Is there a formal public engagement framework in place?
   a. If yes, can you briefly describe that framework?

6. Is there a spectrum of public engagement tools that exist in your local government?
   a. If yes, what are they?
   b. Are there some tools that work better than others and why?

7. What specific engagement efforts can you recall that were particularly successful?
   a. In what context or setting were those efforts conducted?
   b. What keys to success were incorporated into the delivery of that engagement effort?

8. What specific engagement efforts can you recall that were not successful?
   a. What barriers were experienced during the delivery of that engagement effort?
   b. What lessons did the municipality learn from this experience?

9. With respect to public engagement and considering advances in technology, including the increasingly widespread use of social media, what trends have you seen or experienced with local government public engagement?

10. Can you provide three pitfalls that local governments should either avoid or have strategies to mitigate in relation to public engagement?
    a. Why are these pitfalls so detrimental to public engagement?
Appendix B - Questions used in semi-structured interviews with local government practitioners and questions posed through website research

11. What are the three to five core elements associated with your local governments’ public engagement program?
   a. What makes these elements so important to the program?

12. How has public engagement changed over the past five to ten years?

Thank you for participating in this research project.

Website questions:
A component of this master’s project is research on the websites of the local government’s that participated in the semi-structured interviews. The following questions were posed while reviewing the local government’s websites and responses were recorded here.

Website Analysis for <_______________________________(include URL)>  
1. How quickly does public engagement emerge as a theme on the webpage? Is there a link to public engagement from the home page?

2. List the topics that are promoted from the public engagement home page.

3. Is there a public engagement home page? (List URL: _____________________) Is a public engagement policy provided on the webpage? If yes, list URL: ____________________.

4. Are the goals of public engagement clearly stated or communicated to the public on the webpage? If yes, what are the goals?

5. Are there specific public engagement tools promoted on the webpage? If yes, what are the tools?

6. What elements of the webpage promote a welcoming and accepting environment for the public?

7. What collateral material is provided that promotes education about the topic at hand?

8. Provide a list of aspects about the page or set of pages that promote further public engagement.

9. Provide a list of aspects about the page or set of pages that create barriers to further public engagement.
Implementation Strategy:
Public engagement model, policy and activities

- Education for staff and elected officials on public engagement model and IAP2 spectrum of public engagement

- Adopt public engagement policy

- Ongoing education about public engagement principles, practices, methods and tools

- Public engagement for specific projects using public engagement plans

Staff

Public

Elected Officials

Deliver service

Engage

Approve public engagement plan
Public Engagement Model Overview

Engaging with the public can enable local governments to find efficient and effective methods for delivering services. To be successful, public engagement must be purposeful, organized and genuine. **Purposeful engagement** means that goals must be understood and clearly stated. **Organized engagement** means a plan must be developed with appropriate parties and that plan must be delivered in a transparent manner. **Genuine engagement** means the parties involved must understand the value of public engagement. This public engagement model provides a high level overview of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum for public participation, including promises that can be made to the public and engagement methods for each engagement level. The model then poses a series of questions for practitioners to focus engagement efforts and develop a public engagement plan. This model does not build the public engagement plan nor does it constitute engagement in and of itself. Public engagement requires practitioners to work hard with the public, elected officials and co-workers to conduct engagement that is purposeful, is organized and is genuine.

The IAP2 spectrum of public participation describes five levels of engagement, goals associated for each and the public promise derived for each level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public participation goal</th>
<th>INFORM</th>
<th>CONSULT</th>
<th>INVOLVE</th>
<th>COLLABORATE</th>
<th>EMPOWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.</td>
<td>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.</td>
<td>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.</td>
<td>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</td>
<td>To place final decision making in the hands of the public.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We will keep you informed.</td>
<td>We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.</td>
<td>We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.</td>
<td>We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.</td>
<td>We will implement what you decide.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

INCREASING IMPACT OF THE DECISION
Developing a public engagement plan relates to a project’s engagement goals, timeframe, resources and audience. When the project team considers questions on these topics, answers begin to form a public engagement plan.

### Goals (what is the purpose)
- What level of the IAP2 spectrum is required for this project?
- How will public engagement benefit this project?
- What expectations does the public have regarding this project?
- How does increased public engagement improve the service delivery for this project?
- What statutory requirements must be met during the project (i.e. public hearings, legal notices, bylaw readings, etc.)

**Q**

**A**

Answers to these questions help identify the level of public participation for the project, which are “inform”, “consult”, “involve”, “collaborate”, and “empower”. Staff must genuinely approach engagement as being beneficial to a project. While some projects only need to inform the public, many projects are improved by increasing the level of engagement. Finding ways to move a project from inform to consult or from involve to collaborate can result in a more robust project with deliverables that are more publicly supported.

### Timeframe
- Is this project in its early stages to allow for development and implementation of an effective public engagement plan?
- What competing interests or activities could influence or overshadow engagement efforts (NHL playoffs, federal politics)?
- What statutory obligations define the timeframe?

**Q**

**A**

The timeframe for a project establishes the temporal parameters for engagement. Some projects are defined by a set time period through legislation while other projects have more flexibility to engage. The public engagement plan needs to describe important milestones and/or deadlines while also highlighting the points of engagement to clearly illustrate to interested parties when they can expect to be included in the process.

### Resources
- Are the right people part of the project team at the outset of the project?
- What internal human resources are required for this project?
- What external resources or consulting services are required to advance this project?
- How can existing resources be assigned or redeployed to reflect the priority for this project?

**Q**

**A**

Defining the resources describes the commitments that the project requires. This provides advance notice to parties of their involvement with the project and also enables pre-planning for additional resources if required. A project that includes extensive public engagement probably requires additional resources (internal or contracted) and decision makers must understand and support these needs.

### Audience
- How many people does the project impact directly?
- How many people does the project impact indirectly?
- How extensive is the impact of the project on the public?
- How will the environmental, social and financial aspects of the project affect the directly impacted public?
- How will the environmental, social and financial aspects of the project affect the indirectly impacted public?

**Q**

**A**

The audience helps to focus the engagement efforts on the public that is most impacted by the project or service, while balancing other community interests. Attention needs to be given to the members of the public who will help develop the project while also recognizing the role of other segments of a community.

The answers derived from the questions (and other questions that arise during the project team discussions) should be used to formulate the public engagement plan.
Subject: Public Engagement Policy
File code: <enter>

Purpose: The purpose of the public engagement policy is to establish a formal public engagement approach for Comox Valley Regional District (CVRD) projects and operations.

Scope: This policy applies to all CVRD projects and operations. The policy uses the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum of public participation (http://www.iap2.org/) to identify the a) purpose for engagement and b) activities to achieve the engagement goals for each project. Not all projects require a defined public engagement plan however public engagement should be considered for all projects to identify ways in which the project outcome can be improved or public resources maximized during service delivery.

Guiding principle: A common understanding of public engagement among CVRD elected officials, staff and members of the public is important to help ensure parties to engagement are working towards common goals. The following table from the IAP2 illustrates the goals and promises associated with different levels of engagement.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public participation goal</th>
<th>INFORM</th>
<th>CONSULT</th>
<th>INVOLVE</th>
<th>COLLABORATE</th>
<th>EMPOWER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.</td>
<td>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.</td>
<td>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.</td>
<td>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.</td>
<td>To place final decision making in the hands of the public.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We will keep you informed.</td>
<td>We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.</td>
<td>We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.</td>
<td>We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.</td>
<td>We will implement what you decide.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Public engagement plans will incorporate these goals and promises.
CVRD Public Engagement Policy

Policy statement

1. Public engagement must be done with purpose. Engagement for projects must be to inform, consult, involve, collaborate or empower. Engagement could be for more than one of these purposes through a project’s lifecycle.
2. Public engagement must be organized. A public engagement plan provides order, structure and clear expectations to members of the public, elected officials and CVRD staff. The public engagement plan should be developed at an early stage in a project to capture important elements before decisions are made that rule out those opportunities.
3. Public engagement must be genuine. The members of the public, elected officials and CVRD need to understand the value of engagement and participate in engagement activities in good faith in order to realize the full opportunities available from engagement. Ongoing education and skills development by all parties involved in engagement is important to advance the engagement activities and potential.

Related documentation (internal resources)

- Public engagement plan template
- Public engagement model overview

Approval history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Policy adopted:</th>
<th>&lt;date&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Policy amended:</td>
<td>If necessary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Purpose:
<Add text here to describe the reason or purpose for conducting the public engagement. Is it to inform, consult, involve, collaborate or empower? The purpose guides the remainder of the engagement plan and ensures the goals are adhered to as engagement activities are considered, developed and implemented.> The purpose of the public engagement plan is to describe the parameters, resources, actions, outcome and intent of the engagement activities for the <enter name of project>. The public engagement plan also provides CVRD staff, elected officials and the public with directions on how the engagement will occur for the project.

Project background:
<Brief description (half a page maximum) to describe the project. If more information or context is needed to describe the project, an appendix to this public engagement plan could be considered, or specific reference to a project website that contains historic information.>

Situation analysis:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;in each quadrant, list the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats associated with the project, paying particular attention to the convergence between the project deliverables and the public interaction or involvement&gt;</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
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</tbody>
</table>
Public engagement activities:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>IAP2 Goal</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Resources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;describe activity (public hearing, social media post, open house, legal advertisement, etc)&gt;</td>
<td>&lt;inform, consult, involve, collaborate, or empower&gt;</td>
<td>&lt;specific people, geographic area&gt;</td>
<td>&lt;dates, including advance notice as required&gt;</td>
<td>&lt;confirm medium for activity, resource availability – in some cases, specific dollars may be mentioned, particularly when seeking board or CAO approval to authorize the use of funds&gt;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Approval history:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approved by:</th>
<th>&lt;Board, CAO or GM – is determined by whether delegated authority exists&gt;</th>
<th>&lt;Date&gt;</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amended by:</td>
<td></td>
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