

CASE STUDY | COFFEE CREATES COMMUNITY

The Story of Wood Buffalo's Resident Engagement Reset

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INTRODUCTION

A state of emergency was declared no less than three times within a 7-year span in the Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB). In response to the most recent incident, a flood in 2020, the RMWB created the Flood Recovery Engagement Plan to gather feedback from residents and to make risk-informed decisions.

The components of this engagement campaign helped form the basis of a shift in how the RMWB undertakes public engagement, including a five-year plan mapped out in 2020. It began with acknowledging that trust between government and residents was at an all-time low and envisioning how effective engagement might help build better relationships.

Changes in the structure of the department were already underway, even before the flood. The Public Engagement branch was created from an analysis of the functions and resources required to facilitate public participation. Early work involved updating Council's Public Engagement Policy, developing a Public Engagement Framework



The Regional Municipality of Wood Buffalo (RMWB) is Treaty 8 territory and is the traditional lands of the Cree, Dene and the unceded territory of the Métis. Fort McMurray is the urban centre within the region.



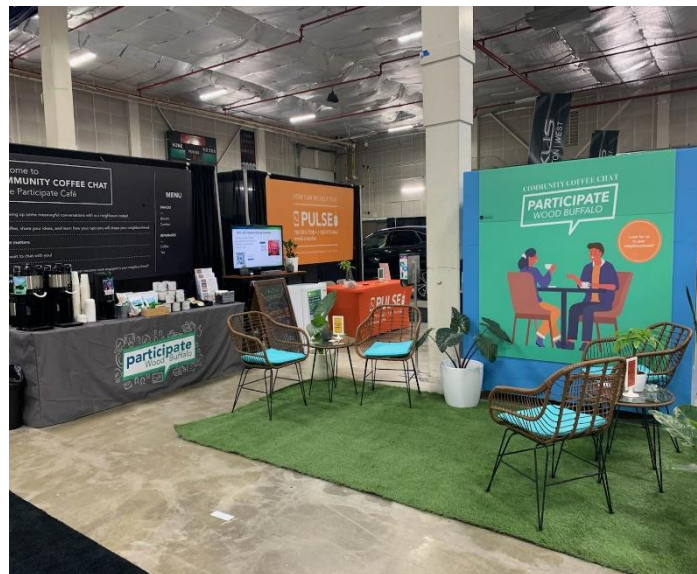
to outline the RMWB's commitment to engaging, guiding principles, roles, and responsibilities, and reporting back to the public.

On this foundation, tools and resources were developed to educate, guide, evaluate and document public engagement campaigns and activities. These resources are regularly reviewed and updated, demonstrating a genuine focus on continuous improvement toward meaningful, relevant, and impactful public engagement.

RMWB's Approach to Community Engagement

The RMWB began engaging by gathering the contact information of homeowners and businesses in the neighbourhoods affected by the flood. This allowed the municipality to create a network which they could share critical information with. Within one neighbourhood, this network resulted in a neighbourhood group which meets with the Engagement branch on a regular basis. This has resulted in ongoing sessions where the community discusses emerging issues with subject matter experts, with in-person and virtual options available. Given the success of the first engagement, the RMWB wanted to replicate this model in other neighbourhoods.

The results of this specific engagement confirmed what the Engagement team had long suspected: residents want to engage, but they often do not know how to. Residents needed clarity on how to maneuver the processes and different steps required to provide feedback about what mattered most to them. This feedback, in tandem with a management team that supports innovation and building relationships, inspired the team to think outside of the box with its engagement.



Fort McMurray Spring Trade Show and Artisan Market

Inspired to do community engagement differently, the department decided to pilot a new engagement tactic at the biannual trade show at McDonald Island Park that is hosted by the Chamber of Commerce. Because Fort McMurray is located five hours from the nearest city centre (Edmonton), this is a huge attraction for the region, with vendors from across the country coming to showcase their goods and services. In the past, the RMWB rented a small booth and handed out pamphlets and answered questions about the current campaigns. RMWB knew they could do things differently and better. The first trade show in two years was scheduled for the spring of 2022. This was going to be an event that brings everyone

from the community out and the RMWB was aware of this. It presented the perfect opportunity to engage and try something new.

But First, Internal Buy-in

It was important that other departments within the organization were invited to contribute throughout the planning process (most importantly during the early stages). This included PULSE, which is the customer contact centre like 311 in municipalities across Canada. The inclusion of PULSE presented an opportunity to provide additional information on what PULSE is and how to use it. It also allowed PULSE staff to build relationships with residents and learn more about the challenges they face in their community.

After several planning sessions, the RMWB had landed on the idea to create a café style stall where people could walk through and provide feedback on various topics. All staff dressed up as baristas with branded aprons. This stall was very much an experience, where municipal staff would guide residents through the different engagement activities from the “menu” of current projects and provide them with branded coffee cups with coffee roasted locally. The activities included a dotmocracy, various sticky note feedback activities, an ‘ask the mayor board’ and a ‘what we’ve heard board’. This approach resulted in over 700 conversations across the 3 days of the spring trade show.



“Can I get you a coffee?”

The hook to invite people to learn more.



Residents were asked to have a cup of coffee as a natural conversation-starter. While serving coffee to guests, engagement staff were able to find out about the topics that mattered most to them. From there, staff guided guests through the booth space, inviting them to participate in a dotmocracy exercise, add a question to the “ask the mayor” board, provide feedback about campaigns specific to the resident’s concerns or neighbourhood, submit a PULSE inquiry or learn about Participate Wood Buffalo (the RMWB’s online engagement platform).

As the tradeshow happens twice a year, the success of the first show made the decision to rent out another stall in the fall an easy one. The fall show had 360 conversations, with a total of over 1000 conversations between the two trade shows. Through the relationships

developed from the tradeshow, RMWB identified priorities for residents in several different neighbourhoods and communities across the region. Through the engagement activities, the RMWB had a list of issues that were organized by different neighbourhoods. This encouraged the RMWB to pursue the next phase of engagement, which is the Neighbourhood Engagement Series.



Neighbourhood Engagement Series

From the 1000 + conversations held at the tradeshow; it was evident that residents within the community are interested in contributing to the change they want to see in their community. While 1000 conversations is a tremendous success, it most likely isn't representative of the various communities in the region. Further engagement was needed to understand if the challenges identified were the main priorities for the communities, or if there are other challenges/interests that the RMWB also needs to be aware of.

Over the summer of 2022, the RMWB held 19 engagement sessions in 6 different communities in the urban and rural communities. In the fall, they had 13 engagements in 13 different urban neighbourhoods. The purpose of these conversations were to begin developing a relationship with residents within the community who are looking to engage. It is also an opportunity for people to come together and meet each other. While there are only a few neighbourhood associations within the region, it is hoped that these conversations will act as a spark to build the capacity of residents to interact with municipal government and advocate on behalf of their neighbourhood to start their own neighbourhood groups/associations.



One thing that should be noted for these engagements was the mindset the RMWB had from the start. It was made clear that the Engagement staff (who hosted the engagements) did not have all the answers, but they can collaborate with residents to identify issues, concerns and opportunities and bring in subject experts to discuss at future meetings. Engagement staff were their connection to the RMWB organization as a whole.

Wood Buffalo's Engagement Tips and Tricks

- **Signage** – “Engagement” has become a buzzword in the community. The RMWB leveraged this word to raise awareness of upcoming neighbourhood sessions with branded lawn signs
- **Accessibility** – The department created branded mailboxes which were rotated between the different communities in the region. Paired with some slips of paper and pens, this mailbox provided another space for residents to share their thoughts alongside the traditional open houses and online project pages.
- **Flexibility** - Make every effort to meet the community where they were rather than asking residents to match into business hours and locations.

Next Steps

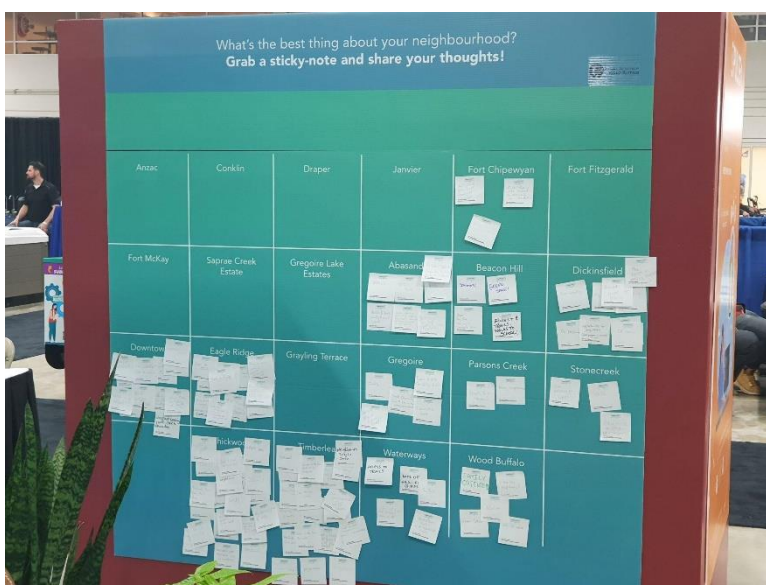
The plan is to continue with the neighbourhood conversations on a quarterly basis. After each engagement, staff will meet with other departments within the organization to make them aware of emerging issues in each neighbourhood. The responses from administration will be relayed back to residence on the Participate Wood Buffalo page, on the RMWB social media channels and at future meetings.

Currently, Wood Buffalo is wrapping up Phase 1 - The Roll Out of the Neighbourhood Engagement Series. The goal of this series is to connect the RMWB with the neighbourhoods directly, to bring awareness to the [Participate Wood Buffalo platform](#) and encourage the residents to be involved in building the community they want to live in.

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This isn't about us having the answers, it's about residents asking the questions.

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An additional goal for these engagements is to build the capacity of residents to engage effectively with the RMWB. As the year progresses, this will involve presentations on what is within the scope of the RMWB, what is within the scope of other agencies, how to bring issues to council, how to start community projects, how to advocate for improved services and amenities, resident defined neighbourhood boundaries and more.

Lessons Learned

- **Listen, Listen, Listen** – Engagement consists of almost entirely listening. When you have a resident's time, allow them to tell their story.
- **Adapt, Improve and Be Flexible** – Engagements cannot be rigid. The more flexible you can be, the more trust that can be created in the community. Don't be afraid to stray from the original plan of a presentation, just ensure the information and content is covered.
- **Mistakes Are Part of The Process** – There are going to be times that the community does not show up and that is okay. That is part of it. It's a relationship, it has ups and downs like any other type of relationship.
- **Unsure Of Something? Act as a Neighbour** – Engagement is ultimately neighbours talking to neighbours, regardless of professional roles. If you are unsure of the best way to say something, think of your conversation as neighbour to neighbour, not Municipal staff to resident.
- **How You Work Internally Affects How You Engage Externally** – Invite other departments to get involved in the process, the earlier the better. Standardizing engagement across all departments will create a more positive and effective engagement with residents. Residents will then understand what to expect when engaging with the organization.
- **Start Small and Build Up from There** – When engaging, set up 1 table with 10 chairs – it is more meaningful to tell someone to bring a chair to join a table, then it is for them to sit at an empty table by themselves as they wait for more people to come.
- **Buy-in** - Get organizational buy-in early so that departments don't feel ambushed by the residents' requests for information and follow-up.
- **Steer Clear of a Wish List** - Avoid developing a "wish list" from the residents. Instead empower the residents to advocate for their "wish list" and work with departments to achieve their desired goals.

Shifting Community outwards in and Municipality inwards out

This case study captures the importance of shifts for multiple parties. The first is the shift within the municipality. There was buy-in at the senior level to try things differently. This buy-in alongside the results of the trade shows created further buy-in from other departments. This has created a shared understanding between departments on the importance and necessity of engaging authentically.

The second is the shift of residents. What is evident from this case study is that residents have the desire to engage and support change in their community, they just don't know where to begin and are unaware that other people in their communities also want to see the same things.



Ask residents what they want rather than assuming we know what they need.

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When taken together, these create an overall shift with how things are done between the Municipality and residents. The Engagement team is shifting from the mindset that it is important to have all the answers, to focus instead on the value of having conversations, where residents can learn about how to be active participants in making the changes they want to see in their neighbourhoods.

Conclusion

The relationship between residents and the governments across Canada has been declining. It is actions such as the ones that RMWB are taking that will improve these relationships, build trust, and empower residents to create the change they want to see.

This case study is a great example of why municipalities need to be less risk-averse when it comes to experimenting with innovative approaches to engaging. Relationships underpin all of the community development work that happens in our municipalities. The status quo, the traditional approach to community development positions the municipality as a service and residents as clients. This builds the foundation of the relationship between municipalities and residents on the premise that exchange is the main form of engagement.

For the most part, residents want to have a say in what happens in their city, in the community and in their neighbourhoods. Often, they do not know how to maneuver the institution and its processes. Residents need to be shown that it is possible and that through some capacity building, they too can work alongside the government, acting as a collaborator, not a client, to contribute to issues that are a priority to them and their community.

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