

SSG

Town of Halton Hills

Pre-engagement Interview Summary

August 2020

Pre-Engagement Objectives + Process

In order to develop a cutting edge Engagement Plan for the Town of Halton Hills' Low-Carbon Transition Strategy (the 'Strategy'), SSG has undertaken a series of pre-engagement interviews with a diverse range of community stakeholders/thought leaders and influencers. These interviews help us identify baseline knowledge about the project among stakeholders, preferences for engagement, stakeholder groups that might otherwise be missed, and other potential issues and opportunities for the engagement process. The goal is to connect with key stakeholders/thought leaders/community influencers from a variety of stakeholder groups to hear from diverse perspectives.

The objective of pre-engagement (as interviews, focus groups, surveys or other techniques) is to listen to and learn from stakeholders so their engagement and communications preferences can help to inform the project engagement design process.

The Town of Halton Hills team identified interviewees and sought their consent to be contacted by SSG for a phone interview. Interviewees included: Halton Hills staff, community leaders, a representative from the school board, the CEO of Halton Hills Hydro, amongst others.

SSG staff conducted ten interviews, by phone, between June 29 and July 31, 2020. The following steps were taken in the interview process:

1. Mike Dean and a team of staff from the Town of Halton Hills identified potential interviewees from a variety of stakeholder groups based on SSG's recommended mix;
2. Interviewees were contacted for a phone interview by SSG staff, provided a project backgrounder, and questions (listed below) were shared in advance;
3. Following the interviews, notes were shared with the interviewees to confirm they accurately reflected their input; and
4. This summary has been developed and will be used to inform the engagement plan for the Low-Carbon Transition Strategy.

Note: interviewees provide a window of insight into the preferences of a particular stakeholder community and their opinions cannot be extrapolated to a larger sample size.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following questions were provided to each interviewee in advance and were asked during the interview.

1. What is important to you as the Town goes forward in making this plan?
2. What, if anything, do you hope to see in relation to implementation of low-carbon actions?
3. What concerns or unknowns, if any, do you have about this project?
4. Tell me how you think stakeholders will be engaged best? What, if anything, hasn't worked in other engagements you have seen?
5. What communications approaches do you think could be most successful in reaching stakeholders interested in this project?
6. Who else should we be speaking with at this point in the decision-making process? Do you have any last thoughts or suggestions for us at this time?

Summary of Pre-Engagement Interviews (by Theme)

The following qualitative analysis of the interviews summarizes stakeholder feedback by theme. Each theme summary concludes with the consultant’s recommendation for the Engagement Plan.

Detailed Pre-Engagement Findings

SUPPORT FOR THE STRATEGY AND THE NET-ZERO TARGET IS HIGH; THE ENTIRE TOWN AND REGION NEEDS TO BE INCLUDED AND INTEGRATED

There was widespread support for the Strategy as well as the net-zero goal from all stakeholders. Many interviewees also stressed that coordination and collaboration among Town departments, community partners, and the Region (Halton Region) will be necessary for plan adoption and implementation. For example, some interviewees recognized that this Strategy has the opportunity to be aligned with and to support other Town and Regional plans underway, from active transportation to the green economy.

“The most important thing is continued collaboration across divisions. Net-zero will require this. Our various plans, priorities and strategies all align - we are going in the same direction. All our efforts should contribute to achieving this goal.”

One interviewee had detailed questions about how the plan may provide opportunities to improve the Official Plan (OP).

“How can we fix the OP to make sure we have infused all of the key tools/sections with the climate change goals? One standalone section that deals with climate change doesn’t cut it. It needs to be infused into all existing strategies.”

Minority perspectives on this theme spoke to their support of the ambitious nature of the goal noting that it was “designed to fail” but that this was necessary for success; ambition was not seen as a negative factor in goal setting.

One interviewee called the net-zero goal “cringe inducing”.

“The other unknown is what the region is doing. They are meeting infrequently. The Commissioner of public works has resigned; there will be a report in September. It’s really fuzzy - the region is out there, doing their own thing, how do we really know what they are doing?”

Engagement Plan Recommendations

Include staff from across the Town and the Region in the engagement process; ensure they are all encouraged to bring forward plans and programs that could and should be aligned with the Strategy.

Undertake education with stakeholders and the public about the 2030 net-zero target.

ENGAGING THE BROADER COMMUNITY IN CREATING THE PLAN

A majority opinion is that widespread engagement of the community is necessary for the plan to be successful and essential to its implementation. Questions of citizen and partner “buy-in” were noted by some and solutions to this were provided by others (ensure that you explain how this plan benefits residents, developers, the business community, etc.).

“It is important to engage the broader community; our goals demand we look at the emitters. This will include residents and school boards, etc. This is a big project and we have to hit a lot of different aspects to be successful. We need to look at food, agriculture, retrofits, how we travel. All those things matter.”

Some interviewees suggested that the level of engagement (not just the widespread nature) will need to be significant in order to gain the support necessary for implementation, and that transparency and regular communications for the duration of the project will be key. Many referred to the Town’s “Let’s Talk Halton Hills” platform as an important site for engagement and trust-building.

Stakeholder groups most frequently mentioned: The Region (Halton Region), schools and the school board, Seniors, the Chamber of Commerce, the library, and Business Improvement Associations. A complete list of stakeholders mentioned can be found in Appendix 2.

Engagement Plan Recommendations

Communicate regularly with stakeholders and the broader public about the project.

Undertake widespread and in depth engagement with the broader community, for example via the Town’s “Let’s Talk Halton Hills” platform.

Key community groups to consider targeting these communication and engagement efforts include: schools and the school board, seniors, the Chamber of Commerce, the library, and Business Improvement Associations.

FUNDING AND INVESTMENT OPPORTUNITIES ARE CRITICAL; FEASIBILITY IS AN ISSUE FOR MANY, AND FAILURE IS AN OPTION

“I want to be part of the solution. The Strategy also represents a business opportunity, and I want to be on the inside track, this is in line with its shareholder’s interest (the Town owns 100% of Halton Hills Hydro).”

Interviewees expressed a desire to better understand and ensure that the Town secures adequate funding to implement low-carbon actions. Potential suggested sources include the province and the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM); one interviewee suggested that this plan could assist in the Town’s pursuit of foreign direct investment (currently being written) for some low-carbon actions around renewable energy generation. One respondent advised that the Town “borrow with authority”.

The majority opinion of respondents was clear that funding/investment/business case opportunities need to be identified and pursued as soon as possible.

Several interviewees asserted that the plan must be ‘feasible’ to be successful. Feasible was defined in a variety of ways:

- That the plan be realistic, affordable, and that it is actually going to achieve the goals we want it to achieve, that it has some ‘oomph’ to it;
- A practical approach to business/economic transition needs to be adopted;
- Practical, affordable, reasonable, enforceable. Communicate that it’s doable, practical and good for you. Position this as beneficial and not scary;
- We need to be fiscally responsible and feasible, can’t ignore the cost of running the community; and
- The plan is ambitious and has to be run collaboratively if it is to be successful.
- Many respondents mentioned that fear of failure should not stop moving forward with one stating: “Action is infinitely better than not acting for fear of getting it wrong - failure has to be acceptable”.

Engagement Plan Recommendation

Focus engagement efforts on refining the Strategy’s feasibility (including financing and local economic development potential), without limiting its ambition.

INTERACTIVE EVENTS AND THE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA WORK WELL FOR ENGAGEMENT IN HALTON HILLS, BUT COVID-19 PRESENTS SPECIAL CHALLENGES

Respondents provided detailed background information on what has worked and what to avoid when engaging the broader community of Halton Hills. Social media was mentioned by a majority of respondents as a necessary channel for communication, in addition to getting

messaging into existing newsletters that are run by a variety of community groups, churches, business and sports associations. Several acknowledged that it can be difficult to reach residents and that advertising in the newspaper should not be seen as adequate on its own – a variety of engagement tactics will be necessary.

Many respondents pointed to the Town’s online engagement platform “Let’s Talk Halton Hills” as a valuable tool and one person advised that it be used for this project for the duration.

Interactive events – where participants have an opportunity to physically participate – were recommended over more (seemingly) passive events such as open houses. Many interviewees mentioned that information heavy events were not a preferred style and haven’t worked as well in the town. Several respondents suggested having guest speakers in Zoom workshops and one respondent suggested a group Zoom event where an upcoming TEDx event on climate be watched and with an opportunity to discuss it afterward.

COVID-19 was recognized by the majority as a significant challenge to creating the types of interactive engagement events that have been successful in the past and that creativity will be required for this project’s engagement efforts, with a focus on providing digital interactive possibilities in order to follow physical distancing rules.

Engagement Plan Recommendations

Leverage social media platforms to communicate and engage with the community.

Avoid information-heavy public engagement events.

Adopt best practices in virtual interactive engagement, including the “Let’s Talk Halton Hills” platform.

Consider incorporating physically interactive public engagement events, if physical distancing restrictions relax and find creative forms of interaction for online engagement events.

DEEP RETROFITS, AND TRANSPORTATION (PUBLIC, ACTIVE AND THE ELECTRIFICATION OF) ARE AT THE TOP OF STAKEHOLDERS' MINDS

A majority of interviewees mentioned the need for a deep retrofits program and were curious as to how this would be initiated and maintained. Transportation was brought up by many respondents who would like the plan to include clear direction for public transportation expansion, a focus on bolstering the active transportation plan that is underway, and how the Town can best address/be a part of the electrification of transport.

Many respondents noted the need to identify the links between the Town's adaptation efforts and this Strategy. For example: one respondent mentioned that water will be an issue, with respect to new buildings, for the Town that needs more attention: "Water will be an issue - my neighbours behind me ripped out their lawn...where's the water going to go? Pretty sure it will be into my backyard. We were talking about a tree bylaw - more trees are good, but from a school board perspective, we take down what is dangerous."

Engagement Plan Recommendations

Focus engagement efforts on developing effective deep retrofit as well as transportation (i.e. public, active, and electrification) programs.

Ensure stakeholders and the general public are clearly informed about the links and the differences between the Strategy and the Town's climate adaptation work.

VISION GEORGETOWN IS SEEN AS AN OPPORTUNITY TO APPLY LOW-CARBON PLANNING AND THAT OPPORTUNITIES FOR PARTNERSHIP ABOUND

"We are also working on Vision Georgetown - it's the poster child, in a way. We are looking to be cutting edge; we need to push the envelope."

Many respondents would like to see Vision Georgetown become an example of low-carbon planning for the Town.

"I would like to see the development of partnerships. We have a new area being built - Vision Georgetown. We know we are going to put 5 schools in there and will need recreational facilities. Why are we creating more parking spaces at the recreation center when there is a church next door? How can we tie these opportunities together to decrease parking, for example?"

"I ran into someone who just moved into one of the new homes in the south part of Georgetown and I asked how it was (she's renting) and she said 'It's ridiculous - I have these high ceilings...what will it cost to heat and there is no grass.' This is something built in the last 3 years. How do you shift the private part of it? We need deep energy retrofits - so how does the Town fund those and get people to move along? We all know that this is the big part."

Engagement Plan Recommendation

Maximize the opportunity for a zero-carbon future in the Vision Georgetown area by engaging with key partners.

Next Steps

Pre-engagement interviews are one piece of information to help inform the engagement plan. Additional sources include project initiation data from the project team and the scoping work of the project team. SSG will work with Town staff to map risks related to issues and stakeholder groups and complete the engagement plan.

This initial step in engagement planning and design demonstrated a commitment to engagement best practices and the IAP2 global standard for community-centric engagement design.