

ENCOURAGING

Citizens' Involvement

ENHANCING FAIR, OPEN AND TRANSPARENT MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENT

By Manitoba Intergovernmental Affairs

All citizens have the right to expect their elected governments – federal, provincial and municipal – to be accountable for the decisions they make and the actions they take. As well, governments have a responsibility to operate in a fair, open and transparent manner. As citizens increasingly want greater involvement in the decision-making process, governments are challenged to provide meaningful opportunities for public participation.

The Municipal Act requires municipalities to provide opportunities for public participation in several key areas - for example, on the annual financial plan or a proposed local improvement - and has rules for how that must occur. By going beyond the basic requirements established in the Act, your municipality can demonstrate to its citizens that it values their involvement in the decision-making process.

Your municipality can do several things to encourage your citizens to be involved:

Provide sufficient public notice of each council meeting and public hearing.

Citizens need to know when you are meeting to discuss municipal business. *The Municipal Act* requires Council to adopt a procedures by-law that establishes fair and consistent rules for council meeting and

public hearing procedures. Council has the opportunity and responsibility to ensure that this includes sufficient advance notice of each council meeting and public hearing. Citizens may become disheartened and suspicious when they find out, too late, that a matter has already been decided.

notices, on the municipal website and in public places throughout the municipality, i.e. local coffee shops and grocery stores as well as the municipal office.

- Including a meeting agenda with meeting notices.



“Fair, open, and transparent decision-making by government instills public confidence.”



To ensure that your citizens are well aware of upcoming meetings and hearings Council should consider:

- Posting the regular meeting schedule at the beginning of each year on the municipal website, in the local paper, and in the municipal office.
- Posting all public hearing and meeting notices, including special meeting

- Calling the media with a reminder of an upcoming meeting (regular, special and information meetings) or a public hearing.
- Inviting citizens who have asked questions about a particular matter to attend the meeting and/or hearing when that matter will be debated and decided.

Encourage public participation at meetings and public hearings.

The need to run efficient and effective meetings and public hearings must be balanced with the need to promote public participation. Consider the importance of:

- Providing citizens an opportunity to register to speak to council as a delegation on any matter, regardless of whether council has already made a decision.
- Providing citizens an opportunity to register to speak to a matter that is included on the meeting agenda.
- Including a time on the meeting agenda for questions from the general public.
- Moving your meeting place to different locations throughout the municipality from time to time, to encourage greater attendance and participation by citizens.
- Conducting informal meetings to apprise your citizens of municipal decisions and enable them to bring forward questions and concerns.

Respond to citizens' concerns.

A common complaint of citizens is that Council has not responded to a letter or a meeting in which a concern has been raised. It is important to ensure that citizens are aware of Council's decisions – even if they may not agree – and to advise them of available avenues of appeal. Some practical suggestions include:

- Providing a written response to all written and oral presentations to council.
- Posting meeting minutes on the municipal website and in the municipal office as soon as practicably possible. Being able to access municipal information without asking for it will reduce calls and questions from your citizens.
- Developing newsletters, utility and tax bills inserts to disperse information to the community.
- Presenting concise and understandable information at your public meetings and public hearings. Too much information can be as frustrating and confusing as no information at all.
- Establishing an access to information policy that will enable administra-

tive staff to provide ready access to information which would be available to the public under *The Freedom of Information and Privacy and Protection Act*.

- Encouraging administrative staff to take the time to answer questions from the citizens.

Fair, open, and transparent decision-making by government instills public

confidence. When discussions are open, public participation is encouraged, and information is readily accessible, citizens have greater trust and confidence in their elected representatives. Your municipality can work to implement innovative ways to provide citizens with meaningful opportunities for involvement, and strive to be fair, open and transparent in all aspects of its operations. **L**



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