

TOWN OF OKOTOKS

ENVIRONMENTAL MASTER PLAN

WHO

The Town of Okotoks, Alberta used Ethelo to engage with residents about its Environmental Master Plan.

WHAT

The collective critique and prioritization of environmental initiatives were used to inform the organization's strategic planning.

NEED

The town's administration wanted to elicit input on a wide range of environmental initiatives, from solar panels to green spaces. This feedback will be used to shape the Environmental Master Plan.

OUTCOME

The project generated 358 responses and more than 1,000 comments. It was one of the most effective forms of public engagement on the Environmental Master Plan.

Developing successful and sustainable community plans requires the wisdom and feedback that only residents can provide.

In this project by the Town of Okotoks Alberta, municipal administrators engaged local residents about its Environmental Master Plan. Their input on a wide range of environmental initiatives is being used to shape the Town's long term sustainability planning.

BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

ANOTHER TOOL IN THE PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT TOOLBOX

Like many cities and towns across Canada, Okotoks – a town of about 30,000 in southern Alberta – is being encouraged to ramp up civic engagement with its residents.

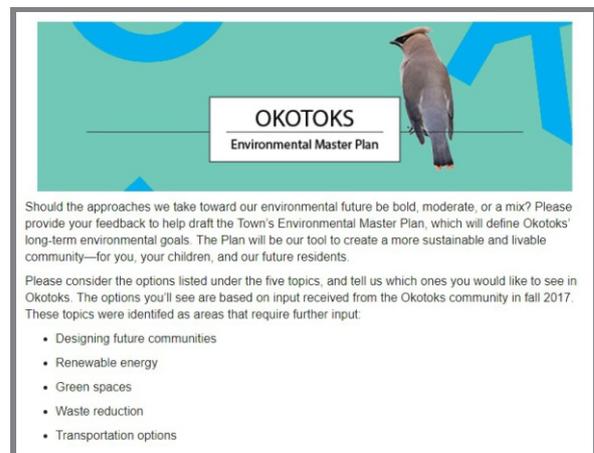
This engagement takes many forms, including online surveys and in-person meetings. The Town was specifically looking to engage with younger residents and families about the Environmental Master Plan. Reaching this group is difficult because of family responsibilities and long commute times into Calgary.

Joan Botkin, the Town's communications manager, said the Town knew an online engagement platform would be the best fit for helping draft the environmental master plan, but became overwhelmed by the sheer number of options on the market.

In choosing Ethelo, she said the Town was looking for a tool that would work not just with this project, but with future needs as well. With so many public engagement opportunities, the Town does not want to overwhelm its residents with options and risk burnout or confusion.

"Every time we had a consultant come in, we saw something different. We wanted to choose something that we could use for another project such as budget planning, down the road," Botkin said. "If we have

something that we're all comfortable with, then it makes things faster and more efficient for us, and our public then understands how to use the tool as well."



Okotoks Communications Specialist Marni Hutchinson said the Town chose Ethelo because of the opportunity to engage in dialogue online. It combined the dialogue of face-to-face engagement with the convenience of an online platform. They also liked that participants could see feedback in real-time, rather than waiting until the results of a survey or focus group were released.

"Ethelo offered a different opportunity in terms of allowing a conversation to happen online," Hutchinson said. **"We can see the general consensus as it's forming and participants have more opportunities to see different perspectives."**

PROCESS

'A CONVERSATION ON THE CYBER STREET'

Once the Town's communications business centre decided on Ethelo for the Environmental Master Plan, they needed to figure out how to capture responses on a wide range of complicated solutions. They did not want to overwhelm people with information, but they also wanted to give residents enough background to make an informed decision.

They worked with Ethelo Professional Services to design the consultation in a way that encouraged thoughtful analysis without becoming overwhelming. Professional Services also assisted with moderating comments throughout the consultation and stepped in to remove a comment that contained profanity.

After consulting with Professional Services, Botkin and



Hutchinson decided to keep the survey anonymous in order to lower the barrier to participation (i.e. requiring registration to login) and encourage participation from as many people in the community as possible.

"We wanted to bring people out of the woodwork to have a conversation on the cyber street and see what their neighbors are saying," Botkin said. "From our perspective, we know who our influencers are because we hear from them all the time, but we don't know how other people in the community feel."

The consultation within Ethelo focused on five main areas: renewable energy, transportation, green infrastructure, urban design, and waste systems. Residents were given information on multiple solutions in each area and asked how much they supported each one. All of the information was deliberately high level, as the goal of the consultation was not to seek input on the feasibility of implementing any of the proposed initiatives.

One danger when talking about anything related to the environment is the spread of misinformation. Botkin and Hutchinson kept an eye on comments as they were being made and stepped in to provide clarification when they knew something was factually incorrect.

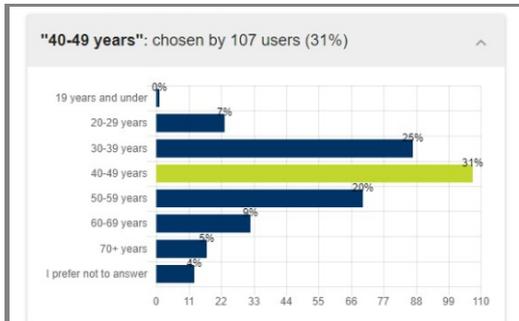
“The hope was that if people were reading those comments, they would read our corrections,” Hutchinson said.

As part of the online consultation, residents ranked each topic on a scale of importance, and then Ethelo’s algorithm used those rankings to create a final list of the proposed changes that had the broadest level of support.

Many of the topics received more than 75 percent approval – suggesting that there was a clear consensus on some of the items to include in the Environmental Master Plan.

RESULTS AND FEEDBACK

CREATING A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE



Beyond what the consultation asked about, it also provided an opportunity for new ideas to gain support. For example, several residents mentioned the idea of a bike share, which the Town had

been considering, and it received support within the comments section. The Town has incorporated it into the Environmental Master Plan.

More than half of respondents were between the ages of 30 and 49, suggesting that the Town reached the demographic it was intending by using Ethelo. This demographic data will prove valuable in determining what other projects will be a good fit for engagement through Ethelo in the future.

Each item in the consultation received an average of 30 comments. Those messages indicated a lively debate among people with multiple points of view on environmental issues and what type of community they wanted to see.

Botkin and Hutchinson are pleased with the feedback they received and consider the consultation an important part of the overall public engagement strategy around the Environmental Master Plan. They also appreciated the support they received from Ethelo Professional Services.

Now that they are familiar with how Ethelo works, they look forward to making the next consultation even better. Botkin said she sees Ethelo being particularly helpful in illustrating the budgetary constraints that the Town faces in trying to meet residents' requests.

It will be a great tool to use on projects that have a set budget in terms of identifying where people want their money to go and the constraints that come with that," Botkin said. "For example, if we are designing a park and people want a fancy swing set then they don't get the climbing structure. Those are the trade-offs we need to help people understand."

They also appreciated the support they received from Dan Hathaway, a member of Ethelo's professional services team. He helped them throughout the entire consultation from set up through reporting and analytics, which was critical since it was their first time using the platform.

"Having that kind of support is key," Hutchinson said. "Often times, vendors will say they can provide that level of support but don't actually follow through, but that was not the case with Dan and with Ethelo."

The public engagement phase of the Environmental Master Plan has ended, and the plan is now being finalized. The implementation phase is expected to begin in 2019.

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Marni Hutchison, Okotoks Communications Specialist

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