

OKOTOKS USES ETHELO TO BRING NEW LIFE TO LAND-USE PLANNING

WHO

The Town of Okotoks, Alberta, used Ethelo to engage with residents about its Land Use Bylaw and potential changes to its Downtown Commercial/South Business Industrial District.

WHAT

The Land Use Bylaw regulates the use and development of all buildings and land in Okotoks. Within each land use district, there are allowable uses designated as either permitted or discretionary.

NEED

Okotoks town officials needed an innovative way to engage residents on what is often a difficult subject for people to understand.

OUTCOME

The interactive Ethelo consultation generated valuable input from the town's residents about how they wanted their neighborhoods to look and helped make a difficult topic easier for everyone to understand.

Municipal land use planning is not something most people are excited to engage on. However, it is critical that local government officials understand what residents want to see in their communities in order to make decisions that will serve everyone for years and decades to come.

Ethelo offered one Canadian town a way to bring life to the otherwise dry topic of zoning and land use bylaws. A configuration of the platform allowed staff to both collect valuable qualitative and quantitative data while giving residents a way to provide their feedback on the types of homes and businesses that could be added to their community in the coming years.

BACKGROUND AND APPROACH

The Okotoks Land Use Bylaw had not been updated since the 1990s and did not account for new types of businesses that wanted to open in the town. However, many of the town's residents were not aware of its existence.

Okotoks turned to Ethelo because it would provide them with the data they needed while giving residents an easy and convenient way to understand an issue that would impact their lives in the years and decades to come.

The Town previously used Ethelo for public consultation on its Environmental Master Plan and its Municipal Development Plan. Government officials quickly saw the value it could bring to the public engagement process by giving residents a convenient way to express their views and preferences that ensured the best solution for everyone in the end.

"We are always looking for new ways to engage our residents and we knew that Ethelo could provide us with a tool to capture residents' vision for what they want their community to be," said Okotoks Communications Specialist Andrea Charlebois.

PROCESS

The Land Use Bylaw Rewrite project was live on Ethelo from January 20-February 14, 2019.

During that time, Okotoks residents and business owners were asked to share their thoughts on the use and development of land and buildings to guide how the town should grow.

The focus of the engagement was on two specific areas of Okotoks - the Central and South Business Districts. For each district, residents gave feedback on;

- Proposed Land Use Changes, in particular to allow a range of new Land Uses, from Amusement Arcades to Retail Cannabis Stores. Some of these Uses were proposed as "Permitted" others as "Discretionary." In some cases, it was proposed to move an existing Use from "Permitted" to "Discretionary" or vice versa.
- Changes to parking requirements, in particular, creating more flexibility for specific kinds of businesses around parking requirements.
- Reducing the minimum set-back for business frontage in a certain area, allowing buildings to be built up to the sidewalk

In addition to giving their own feedback, residents could see how much support each option received and interact with each other in the comments section under each question. There was also an opportunity to provide general feedback on land use issues.

Land use is a classic example of something that the public does not think they need to care about, but something they are likely to have opinions on when provided the background information and asked directly. Using Ethelo allowed Okotoks to inform its residents about the importance of the Land Use Bylaw and give them an opportunity to express their preferences.

Charlebois said the consultation ideas were extremely helpful and brought to light things that government officials would not have otherwise prioritized. It also helped them identify points for future public education and outreach moving forward.

"We really heard a wide variety of things from the community and how people want their neighborhoods to work," Charlebois said. "We were surprised about some of the things people weren't aware of. When you work in this area, you know them, but they can be hard for the general public to understand."

RESULTS AND FEEDBACK

A total of 286 people participated in the online consultation for the Land Use Bylaw Rewrite. Ethelo's algorithm analyzed the results to identify decisions attracting the broadest consensus of support among participants. An additional 183 Okotoks residents weighed in at in-person events and community workshops.

When asked which services or amenities residents wanted within a 10-minute walk of their home, 71% said parks or green spaces, 51% said coffee shops, and 44% said restaurants.

When it came to what type of businesses residents wanted to see in the town, residents were open to a variety of options, but market-style retail drew the largest consensus, with 80% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing.

Having clear, concrete information like this gave Okotoks leaders a solid foundation to move forward.

"We were able to show residents what the future could be and find out what that means to them," Charlebois said. "Ethelo is a helpful tool as it easily captures both qualitative and quantitative data."

One thing the Okotoks team would change in future consultations is having fewer questions and screens for people to click through, in an effort to increase the completion rate.

Okotoks administrators will incorporate the findings into their ongoing research and, eventually, a draft policy direction. The team plans to share its plan with the Okotoks community in fall 2020.

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Andrea Charlebois, Okotoks Communications Specialist

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