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NEWS LOCAL

City eyes new communications and strategic plans for new term of council



By [Barbara Simpson](#), Sarnia Observer
Monday, January 26, 2015 4:30:55 EST
PM



Sarnia city council is exploring a new method to gather public input in an age where opinions are only a few keystrokes away.

City staff have been asked to investigate online public consultation websites in an effort to increase community input on city issues.

"If (people) can't make it to a physical public meeting, their voice can still be heard..." city Coun. Cindy Scholten said of the benefits of an online consultation process.

Sarnia residents would be able to log onto such a public consultation website – for example, PlaceSpeak – and offer their thoughts on a proposal before the city.

In the case of PlaceSpeak, city Coun. Cindy Scholten said the website verifies the address of the resident and allows him or her to select from a list of city topics they wish to be notified of.

City councillors on Monday brainstormed a variety of strategies to improve city communications at their corporate priorities and strategic planning meeting.

Scholten, who campaigned on improving city communications, said the city must continue its promotion efforts on social media sites like Facebook.

Forty-eight per cent of 18-to-34-year-old Facebook users check their accounts first thing in the morning,

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noted Scholten, who works in the communications field.

"We don't have a problem attracting retirees," she added. "We have a problem attracting young professionals, young families."

Fellow Coun. Matt Mitro suggested the city could leverage MyCNN – a recently-launched community notification system for emergencies – to promote "more mundane" activities like events.

"I think it's a fantastic opportunity," he added. "It costs zero."

But Sarnia Mayor Mike Bradley pointed out local industry is funding the notification system that is already putting "too much information out."

Coun. Mike Kelch said he has heard similar complaints from the community.

"We're getting a lot of notifications and I've had people calling saying, 'How do I opt out of this?' which isn't easy," he said, adding at a certain point too much information becomes spam.

City politicians also discussed Monday a new strategic plan for this four-year term of council.

While city staff pitched a process that would involve more front-end research – one-on-one interviews with stakeholders, for example – council opted for a more simplified approach where staff would prepare a draft using the existing strategic plan.

"Like any process, if I can't explain it to the community, I don't want to be part of the process and I wouldn't be able to explain this process to the community," Kelch said.

While city staff recommended the use of a consultant, several councillors suggested a community facilitator could be used for a fraction of a cost.

"It is our job," Kelch added of developing a strategic plan. "It is what we were elected to do."

City staff have budgeted \$40,000 to cover all external costs, like printing and consultation, for the new strategic plan. The document is expected to be wrapped up in the third quarter of the year.

barbara.simpson@sunmedia.ca

DID COUNCIL PASS THE TEST?

The former city council listed the following as their priorities in their 2008 strategic plan:

- Healthy balance sheet: Building a financial framework for a sustainable city;
- Green life cycle management, protecting the taxpayer capital investments and promoting generational fairness;
- Transforming city service delivery via continuous improvement.

(Source: City of Sarnia staff report)

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 · 4 months ago
Ryan ago
 Finally... use technology. Maybe some of the younger voices, the future of Sarnia will participate. Lets hope city staff move in this quickly and council does not let them spend big bucks studying it for a few years
 4 ^ ▾ · Share >

 · 4 months ago
a_w_young ago
 I'm glad we're finally acknowledging that maybe we need to get with the times, but with respect to all involved: Researching solutions to a problem



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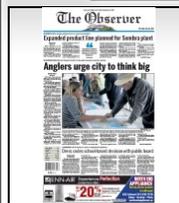
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you're not adequately defining may be a mistake, and there are better solutions available than what's mentioned, and plenty of models of municipalities adopting progressive standards for public information and consultation. It isn't something we can just wing, and it isn't just a "neat program you find and use," nor is it a good idea to solve these problems completely piecemeal.

There needs to be a simple but comprehensive multi-point plan in place that ensures that there are some standards adopted, and that everyone has access to what they need. (We don't even have functional standards for the information that is available now, or a modern website that works on all devices).

I'm sure we'll get there, sounds like some first steps being made. I'll be cautiously optimistic, though I'm not sure staff and council have adequate perspective of how these things work on their own. I have my own

...and probably look at this through a different lens because of

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Older&Wiser · 4 months ago

Congratulations to Cindy Scholten on her forward thinking, using modern technology to communicate with residents. This is fresh thinking.

Using social media automatically puts a bias on clientele who may contribute ideas. Yes, social media sites are widely used, but there is a certain "disconnect" or "arm's length" non-reality with all of them. I'm not saying social media contributors wouldn't be valued, but there is a built in bias BECAUSE it is social media. Social media sites are not primarily intended to be for the users' benefit. Every bit of data one supplies to a social media site is logged and filed in a user profile, or dossier, on every account holder. Do a search for "Rapleaf" in the New York Times, the story about Linda Twombly. Follow some of the additional links, too.

If a city councillor wanted to take the time, he/she could sit down in any coffeeshop and discuss an issue with a resident. This is dialogue, and it is an age-old, honoured tradition that works. Social media doesn't promote the "presence" that face-to-face does. How valuable, then, is the information?

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surgeon42 · 4 months ago

It appears you signed up for discuss commenting about the same time this article came out. I am happy how pleased you seem with yourself, Cindy.

2 ^ ▾ · Share ›

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