

Town's Strategic Plan Open House an overwhelming success

Written By **PETER RICHARDSON**

The CDRC Arena hall was home to Council's Public Meeting on it's newly unveiled Strategic Plan last Wednesday evening (March 20).

Despite being sparsely attended, there were less than 25 residents who took part, the effort was an overwhelming success.

Mayor Wade Mills welcomed the attendees and outlined the Plan, before turning the meeting over to CAO Denyse Morrissey to outline the procedures and conduct the proceedings. Several Councillors and staff were on hand to assist, in the discussions and the response from the public was robust, with a plethora of suggestions being put forward.

The idea of the meeting, was to have the residents flesh out the various categories of the Plan, with suggestions as to what they would like to see happen. In essence, help flesh out the document categories with options as to how the Plan should be implemented and prioritized.

The process, was simple and straight forward. Each participant was given a post-it notepad and along one wall, were large posters outlining the Targets and Goals of the Plan. Each section was discussed by the residents and their suggestions were written on their post-its and placed on the posters, for staff to collect at the end. The request was for each participant to place up to two suggestions for each category.

The discussions and debates were lively and productive as residents presented their thoughts and opinions and chose which ones they would place on the post-its. Councillors offered their guidance as to how they had envisioned the make up of the Plan and offered suggestions as to the interpretation of various items.

The main headings of the Plan, were the Vision of Council, to guide the Town, their Mission, or what they will do and their Values, the core beliefs that underpin their activities. These were defined as follows, Vision: To be an engaged, connected and innovative community. Mission: To build a strong, vibrant community, honour our heritage and celebrate our diversity. Values: Innovative, Respect, Integrity, Engaged, Community.

Within these guidelines, Council was asking the residents to offer their definitions of what these Values represented and how they could best be implemented into Goals and Targets.

The suggestions covered a large gamut of options and wishes. When it came to the core three, the general consensus was positive and supportive. However, when the Goals were scrutinized, the responses were much more varied and purposeful.

When it came to the sub heading of Sustainable Goals, the suggestions flowed. They wanted to see more commerce and industry in Town. A downtown filled with shops and retail as opposed to private businesses and engaging the population in the growth of the Town. They wanted a balanced growth, but not one based solely on population.

The central thought was one devoted to the entire growth of the Town and not solely the increasing of residents. New jobs and opportunities were important points and an increase in industry and commerce to provide more opportunity for existing residents was a priority.

In regards the Long Range Financial Plan, the participants wanted to see accountability, lower taxes and above all a reduction in the Town's long term debt, which was seen as being too high and a potential threat to future prosperity. In addition, the adding of better medical facilities was a priority, as was more street lights, better recreation facilities, possibly an indoor swimming pool, cleaning up the downtown core, reducing truck traffics, a by-pass, public transport, better sewers and cleaning up the laneways in Town.

This list is far from everything suggested and remarkably, was predominantly exactly what Council has been considering and discussing, so the Town and its representatives are essentially all on the same page. Certainly a good sign.

As the process continued through the goals and targets, the flow of input kept pace, with the enthusiasm. Resident Debbie Harrison commented that in regards entering into partnerships with groups or organizations, to achieve specific goals, that the various service clubs and churches were strong resources for the Town to approach for things like Streetfest or the Car Show. Even if they only provided manpower, it was one less thing for the Town to provide.

Bella Carter opined that as a new resident, she often felt disconnected from the organizations in Town, feeling left out, or an outsider. Deputy Mayor Steve Anderson took this opportunity to put forth the idea of a Welcome Wagon or similar organization to make new comers aware of all the services and organizations available in Shelburne and to help them avail themselves of the facilities.

From that, the topic of how to engage the community brought forth suggestions of hosting more meet and greet opportunities and the use of social media to promote involvement and community. The possible use of a movie night in the park, or a community garden was raised as a way to get to know each other.

When things moved to culture, there was considerable input. More use of the Town hall art displays was mentioned, as was greater use of Grace Tipling Hall.

Dave Hawthorne stated that Shelburne once had a much more active downtown and that it was sorely missing at present. Another person suggested that more people need to take the initiative and promote cultural activities in Shelburne. The Town is changing its cultural and ethnic identity demographic and highlighting this will draw people together and show the wonderful diversities that different cultures can provide the citizens of Shelburne. To this end, it was put forward that, more and different restaurants with a diverse food menu would be a great asset and a tourist draw to Town.

Over all, the night was a great success. The process will be continued, via the Town's Bang the Table feature online, for the next month, before the final draft of the Strategic Plan will be adopted.

If the response is as productive and encouraging as Wednesday night, the results should be outstanding. The onus, will then be placed squarely on Council to follow the Plan and deliver on what the residents have suggested, without losing sight of their fiscal responsibility to maintain a balanced and progressive budget.

Nothing is quite as powerful as an informed and engaged electorate.