



REPORT

Council

Meeting Date: November 18, 2024

FROM: Corporate Strategy and Government Relations Department
DATE: November 5, 2024
SUBJECT: **Public Notice and Engagement Policy and Procedure Update**
LOCATION: Town Hall
WARD: Town-wide

Page 1

RECOMMENDATION:

That the updated Public Notice and Engagement Policy be approved.

KEY FACTS:

The following are key points for consideration with respect to this report:

- On June 17, 2024, Corporate Strategy staff presented an updated Public Notice and Engagement Policy for Council approval.
- Council referred the item back to staff to further explore public notice requirements for statutory public meetings and the timeframe to inform Council members of the matters within their ward.
- In September 2021, Council expanded the distance requirement for statutory public meetings for Draft Plans of Subdivision, Official Plan Amendment, and Zoning By-law Amendment applications from the minimum required 120 metres to 240 metres.
- In May 2024, the town launched an [e-Alert feature](#) that provides various types of notice to residents that subscribe to the free service.
- An increase to the notice distance requirement may not be the most effective way to inform residents of important matters happening within the town. Encouraging residents to sign up for the e-Alert feature would be the most effective communication tool, other than planned engagement activities.
- Work to develop an engagement program will commence this year, with implementation of the program expected to come forward as part of the 2026 budget process.

BACKGROUND:Council Direction

The matter of statutory notice distance requirements for applications subject to the Planning Act was previously considered at Planning and Development Committee on [September 13, 2021](#), with the [report](#) titled “Development Application Notice Report”. The report provided a comprehensive overview of current processes for providing notice including the regulated compliance requirements, benchmarking of other municipalities, fee and cost considerations. [Appendix A](#) – Notice Comparison Table, of that report, provided a listing of the types of notice and distance requirements for the 12 municipalities used in the comparison. Of those, two municipalities (Brampton and Kitchener) had adopted a 240 metres distance requirement.

Council passed the following [resolution](#):

That all future statutory public meetings for Draft Plans of Subdivision, Official Plan Amendment, and Zoning By-law Amendment applications require a mail-out notice to all properties within 240 metres of the subject property starting in January 2022, when fees for development applications are updated to reflect the increased circulation area.

On June 17, 2024, Corporate Strategy staff presented an updated Public Notice and Engagement Policy ([Item 8.3, minutes/resolution](#)) for Council approval. The Council resolution on the matter was:

That this item be referred to staff to further explore public notice requirements for statutory public meetings and the timeframe to inform Council members of the matters within their ward and report back to Council at the August 13th Council meeting.

Corporate Surveys

Staff have recently conducted surveys that provide insight into how the community would like to be engaged. The 2024 Community Satisfaction Survey launched in February indicated that a majority of the public (75%) use the town’s website to find information about the Town of Oakville. Of those that use the town’s website, 87% are satisfied with their experience using it.

As part of the Public Notice and Engagement Policy update, staff launched a survey in March to better understand how the community would like to be engaged. When asked “How would you like to be engaged?”, the top responses were:

- 17% online surveys
- 12% attend online meetings where information is shared via a presentation and I can ask questions

- 11% attend in-person meetings where information is available and I can ask questions
- 10% participate in “pop-up” events at various locations throughout the town that may include information sharing and interactive activities

The survey also asked “How could the town improve in keeping you informed and engaged about important initiatives that affect you and your community?”. Of the 183 respondents, 113 left written responses. No comments requested that the notice distance requirements be expanded. Two comments were specific to notice. One comment received suggested that targeted notices can be done through social media. The other comment suggested offering consistent and timely email notices of upcoming meetings or topics for residents that the community may register or sign up to receive.

E-Alert Feature

In May, the town introduced a new e-Alerts tool on the [News and Notices web page](#) that allows residents, businesses and community groups to get notified by email when the town issues news releases and public notices ([news release](#)). This is a free subscription and users can choose to receive alerts either daily or weekly and can also select which types of notices they wish to receive. Types of notices available are: news, public notices, planning public notices, heritage notices and/or service disruptions.

The new e-Alert feature was broadly promoted with the following tactics:

- Community Advisory issued on May 16th to the media
- Tax bill insert about e-Alerts was sent in May to all households
- An advertisement was placed in the Seniors activity guide (fall edition)
- TV screen tiles at community centres
- Social medial posts on all channels

As of early October 2024, 686 individuals have subscribed to the e-Alerts tool.

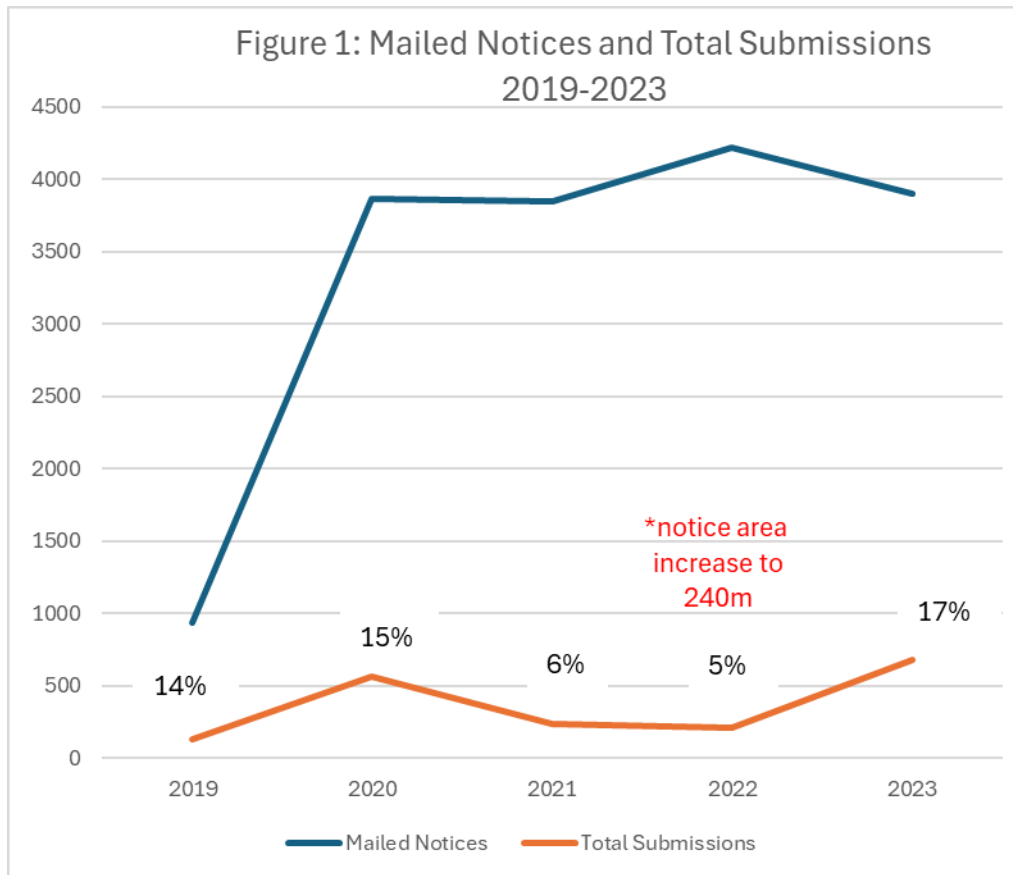
COMMENT/OPTIONS:

Notice Distance Requirements

Council has requested that staff explore public notice requirements for statutory public meetings. Staff had explored this matter in 2021 and best practice research indicated that only two municipalities of 12 had expanded their notice distance to 240m, which town Council adopted.

Staff have collected data from 2019-2023 on the number of notices that have been issued for planning applications along with the number of written and oral submissions received for each in order to calculate the response rate (Figure 1).

At first glance, while the response rate increased from 2022 to 2023 following the increase of the notice distance to 240m in 2022, staff note that the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are also in play, and that the broader trend suggests more of a return to a pre-pandemic norm. The post-pandemic response rate of 17% is generally within range and consistent with the pre- or early pandemic response rates of 14-15%, suggesting that the 2022 increase may not have had a large impact.



For town-initiated notices, in many cases, the town already goes above and beyond the 240 m notice requirements. With permission, the Planning Department maintains a constant contact list, which is a compilation of contacts that have requested to be circulated on planning notices within the town.

As well, when petitions are received on development applications or town-initiated official plan amendments, those residents are added on those circulation lists as that particular item moves forward through the engagement process.

Staff reached out to the same 12 municipalities that were surveyed in the 2021 report to see if they have made any changes to their distance requirements since then. Of the ones that responded, no increases were made.

Changing Times and Notice Evolution

As we move forward, increasing the notice distance requirement may not be the best way to inform residents of matters within the town for many reasons.

Canada Post is reviewing its service delivery model in light of increased competition, higher operating costs and reduced need for physical mail. One of the options under consideration is providing mail delivery every two or three days rather than an everyday service.¹ Such a change would negatively impact the speed at which information is shared with the public. Further, mailed notices in general are at risk of getting lost or thrown out with the vast number of flyers and other advertising notices that are common in current day mailboxes.

Another disadvantage of paper notices is that the secondary residential market—i.e. people who rent homes or live in multi-unit buildings—does not directly receive notices in their mail. Survey responses indicate that most residents are locating town information on the town's website. E-Alerts would be a useful option for those living in secondary markets, so that they can receive up-to-date town information.

In addition, from an environmental sustainability perspective, paper notice delivery has a greater negative impact on the environment than email notice including increased carbon emissions. In an article produced by 8billiontrees.com, they report that "Up to 29 grams of CO₂ can be emitted from the process of posting a standard letter, which includes indirect and direct emissions. Some indirect emissions are generated by transport and sorting of mail."² Although the article focuses on the emissions generated by email sharing, it states that "Compared to the energy and emissions generated by paper mail, email is certainly much better for the planet. Sending an email uses about 1.7% of the energy it takes to deliver a paper letter, which is a huge reduction."

All public notice requirements are currently posted to the town's website and the new e-Alerts tool allows for any interested member of the community to sign up for daily or weekly alerts. Members of the community interested in knowing the town's activities are encouraged to sign up for this free service.

Typically, for town-initiated planning projects that may have a greater impact on residents beyond the standard notice distance, including those that might be driving to or through the project area, and may be more sensitive in nature, a larger distance requirement for notice is already considered. For example, for the Midtown OPA, the town circulated notice within an 800 m radius. Larger scale town-initiated projects have communications/engagement plans that identify various methods for

¹ Online news article from City News, dated May 7, 2024 [Canada Post may switch to delivering mail every two, three days \(citynews.ca\)](https://www.citynews.ca/news/canada-post-may-switch-to-delivering-mail-every-two-three-days)

² Online article from 8billiontrees.com; [Email Carbon Footprint vs. Paper Letter by Mail \(And the True Price of SPAM\) \(8billiontrees.com\)](https://www.8billiontrees.com/blog/email-carbon-footprint-vs-paper-letter-by-mail-and-the-true-price-of-spam)

notifying the public of engagement opportunities, and these may be more effective in providing awareness on a matter. These tactics may include: emails, newsletters (both town and Councillor/Mayor), social media posts, social media advertising, boulevard signs, etc., in addition to regular website updates. Corporate Communications is exploring options to do more targeted messaging through email and social media.

Developer requirements are not as restrictive as those of the municipality. However, there are a number of standard touch points with the community throughout the planning application process, including:

- Public Information Meeting with notice
- Notice of complete application
- Notice provided before a public meeting in accordance with statutory requirements
- Notice of decision

The best way to get information about town activities is to visit the town's website and for those interested in more regular updates that are delivered directly to email addresses, members of the community should sign up for the new e-Alert feature. Corporate Communications will run ongoing campaigns quarterly to ensure residents are aware of the e-alert feature.

Engagement Program

Following approval of the Public Notice and Engagement Policy, staff will communicate this internally through a variety of methods and will broadly promote the public engagement guide. We will also introduce staff training on consultation methods and survey development. While the Communications team does provide advice on some consultations, their current capacity is limited. There are also preliminary plans to create a formal community engagement program, which will include resourcing options. Work on identifying program needs will start later this year and implementation of the program will come forward as part of the 2026 budget process.

Inform Council Members of Notice

The second matter that Council directed staff to review at the June meeting was the timeframe to inform Council members of matters within their ward. The following wording was carried forward from the existing procedure:

All Members of Council will be informed for matters of town-wide interest and the Mayor and Ward Councillors will be informed for matters that are area/location specific.

The intent of this clause is to ensure that Mayor and Council are informed of public notices *at the same time* they are shared with the broader community, allowing them

to stay engaged, updated and prepared to respond to any inquiries. Staff advise that notifications to Mayor and Council occur simultaneously with the public release to ensure consistency in timing and messaging. Releasing notices broadly and uniformly helps prevent any potential confusion in the community.

Further, some notifications have legislated requirements from the date of notice to avoid challenge of certain development applications, therefore, the official notice date should stand. For projects and larger scale development applications, timelines of engagement and notice are typically included in initial reporting and communications plans to Planning and Development Committee. These reports would function as the early flag for Council members of upcoming events or meetings.

For some non-planning matters, Councillors may be contacted by staff to determine notice requirements with limited scope. This is common for engineering works, typically smaller disruptions, such as those that may occur on a street for works maintenance.

For clarity, staff propose changing the wording in the procedure to the following:

All Members of Council will be informed for matters of town-wide interest and the Mayor and Ward Councillors will be informed for matters that are area/location specific at the time the notice is released to the public on the town's website.

CONSIDERATIONS:

(A) PUBLIC

The public has provided feedback on how they interact with the town and how they would like to be engaged in town activities through two recent surveys, the 2024 Community Satisfaction Survey and the Public Engagement Survey. The majority of respondents receive most of their information on the town from the town's website.

(B) FINANCIAL

There are no financial impacts as a result of this report at this time.

(C) IMPACT ON OTHER DEPARTMENTS & USERS

Impacted departments were consulted as part of the writing of this report including Planning, Legal, Corporate Communications and Corporate Strategy.

(D) COUNCIL STRATEGIC PRIORITIES

This report addresses Council's strategic priorities: Community Belonging and Accountable Government.

(E) CLIMATE CHANGE/ACTION

There is no direct impact to climate change or action as a result of this report. It is worthwhile to note that electronic forms of notice are more environmentally friendly as they reduce the use of paper products and gas emissions related to delivery.

APPENDICES:

Appendix A: Public Notice and Engagement Policy

Prepared by:

Shahada Khan, Corporate Strategy Program Advisor

Recommended by:

Swaraj Mann, Manager, Corporate Strategy

Submitted by:

Julie Clarke, Director, Corporate Strategy and Government Relations