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The Corporation of the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake Information Report to Council

SUBJECT: 2025 Budget Survey Results
DATE: 2024-11-20
REPORT #: CAO-24-049
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BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake's annual budget covers a wide range of services that support Town operations and deliver programs and services required to maintain the high quality of life enjoyed in the community.

The Town's budget is made up of both operating and capital budgets that are designed to address programs, services, asset management, infrastructure, Council objectives, and more.

SURVEY DETAILS

On October 17, 2024, Town Staff launched a survey to gather feedback on the 2025 budget. Initially set to close on October 31, 2024, the survey period was extended to November 10, 2024, due to a low response rate. To boost participation, Staff increased promotional efforts through newspaper and social media advertisements. Registration was not required for participation. In total, **ninety-six** (96) respondents completed the survey, which is 20 fewer than those who participated in the 2023 survey for the 2024 budget.

The 2025 Budget Survey was divided into three parts:

1. Questions about you
2. Questions about the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake services
3. Other comments and suggestions

The survey was advertised via a news release on the Town's website and social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and X, formerly Twitter), as well as in newspaper advertisements.

SURVEY RESULTS

Staff have reviewed and analyzed the survey results, and a summary of the key themes is provided below, followed by the actual results from each question. Responses are shown as percentages (%); however, please note that some totals may not equal 100% due to rounding. Additionally, for questions allowing multiple selections, totals may exceed 100%.

For Council's convenience, the highest responses in each category have an asterisk (*).

Note: In alignment with best practices associated with survey analytics and to protect the anonymity of survey respondents, the raw written data of this survey will not be provided for public viewing. This best practice aligns with Ontario's Information and Privacy Commissioner, whereby the agency advises reporting survey results as aggregated information without identifying specific individuals.

General Summary

The survey responses indicate that most participants are long-term residents, with 65.2% living in the area for over 10 years and the majority falling in the 55+ age group (71.9%). Respondents generally support maintaining or enhancing municipal services, particularly in Public Works and Fire & Emergency Services, though satisfaction varies, with Council & Administration services receiving lower ratings. Concerns about high taxes and spending efficiency were common, with suggestions to increase revenue from tourism rather than local taxes. Infrastructure improvements and affordable housing were top priorities, and participants expressed a preference for clear communication through email alerts, infographics, and website updates.

Survey respondents largely prefer maintaining current service levels, with over 50% choosing to keep services like Corporate Services, Parks, Recreation & Facilities, and Street Lighting at existing funding levels. However, a significant portion of respondents rated the overall value for their tax dollars as only "fair" (39.6%) or "poor" (27.1%), indicating that while they are generally supportive of maintaining services, they feel there is room for improvement in the perceived value for money.

Results by Question

Q1: Which of the following statements describes your connection to the Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake? Please select all that apply.

**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| Answer | Percentage of Responses |
|---|-------------------------|
| I am a resident. | 99.0%* |
| I am a business owner/operator. | 5.2% |
| I am a visitor. | 0% |
| I live nearby and use municipal services. | 1.0% |
| I work in Niagara-on-the-Lake. | 10.4% |
| I prefer not to say. | 0% |
| Other (please specify). | 0% |

Q2: How many years have you lived in Niagara-on-the-Lake?**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| Answer | Percentage of Responses |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Less than 2 years | 0% |
| 2 to 5 years | 12.5% |
| 6 to 10 years | 21.9% |
| 11 to 15 years | 14.6% |
| 16 to 20 years | 11.5% |
| More than 20 years | 29.2%* |
| I am not a resident. | 1.0% |
| I prefer not to say. | 0% |

Q3: In what age category do you fall?**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| Answer | Percentage of Responses |
|----------------------|-------------------------|
| Under 15 years | 0% |
| 16 to 24 years | 1.0% |
| 25 to 34 years | 6.3% |
| 35 to 44 years | 6.3% |
| 45 to 54 years | 13.5% |
| 55 to 64 years | 27.1% |
| 65+ years | 44.8%* |
| I prefer not to say. | 1.0% |

Q4: What is your employment status?**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| Answer | Percentage of Responses |
|------------------------|-------------------------|
| Employed full-time | 25.0% |
| Employed part-time | 6.3% |
| Self-employed | 9.4% |
| Unemployed | 3.1% |
| Retired | 54.2%* |
| Student | 0% |
| Other (please specify) | 2.1% |

Q5: Do you have children under the age of 18 living in your household?**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| Answer | Percentage of Responses |
|--------|-------------------------|
| Yes | 8.3% |
| No | 91.7%* |

Q6: The Town of Niagara-on-the-Lake provides a variety of services to support and enhance the community and its residents. The following questions are about services funded through your Municipal tax dollars and delivered by the Town.

Important note: Services such as building, water and wastewater, and parking services are funded through user rates. Please refer to future questions to provide feedback on these areas.

In 2025, should the following Town services be:

- **Enhanced (increase service level or funding)**
- **Maintained (same amount of service level or funding)**
- **Reduced (decrease service level or funding)**

**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| | Enhanced | Maintained | Reduced | I am not sure |
|---|-----------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| By-law Enforcement (\$36.58 per average \$544,000 assessment) | 16.6% | 58.3%* | 22.9% | 2.0% |
| Community & Development Services e.g., planning applications and permits (\$95.52 per average \$544,000 assessment) | 17.7% | 58.3%* | 22.9% | 1.0% |
| Corporate Services e.g., tax collection (\$266.13 per average \$544,000 assessment) | 7.2% | 57.2%* | 33.3% | 2.0% |
| Council & Administration (\$64.97 per average \$544,000 assessment) | 3.1% | 54.1%* | 39.5% | 3.1% |
| Fire & Emergency Services (\$194.37 per average \$544,000 assessment) | 18.7% | 78.1%* | 3.1% | 0% |
| Library Services (\$76.31 per average \$544,000 assessment) | 10.4% | 54.1%* | 33.3% | 2.0% |
| Municipal Purposes e.g., day-to-day operations (\$26.94 per average \$544,000 assessment) | 6.2% | 80.2%* | 11.4% | 2.0% |
| Parks, Recreation & Facilities (\$337.63 per average \$544,000 assessment) | 19.7% | 64.5%* | 14.5% | 1.0% |
| Public Works e.g., roads, water and infrastructure (\$345.48 per average \$544,000 assessment) | 53.1%* | 45.8% | 1.0% | 0% |
| Street Lighting (\$45.23 per average \$544,000 assessment) | 13.5% | 78.1%* | 8.3% | 0% |

Q7: How satisfied are you with the following municipal services?

**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| | Very Satisfied | Satisfied | Somewhat Satisfied | Not satisfied | Not satisfied at all | I don't know |
|----------------------------------|----------------|-----------|--------------------|---------------|----------------------|--------------|
| By-law Enforcement | 6.25% | 37.5%* | 27.0% | 16.6% | 4.1% | 8.3% |
| Community & Development Services | 6.25% | 35.4%* | 28.1% | 18.7% | 9.3% | 2.0% |
| Corporate Services | 7.2% | 33.3% | 36.4%* | 8.3% | 3.1% | 11.4% |
| Council & Administration | 4.1% | 20.8% | 30.2%* | 21.8% | 22.9% | 0% |
| Fire & Emergency Services | 28.1% | 56.2%* | 12.5% | 3.1% | 0% | 0% |
| Parks, Recreation & Facilities | 15.6% | 51.0%* | 29.1% | 4.1% | 0% | 0% |
| Public Works | 5.2% | 41.6%* | 41.6%* | 8.3% | 2.0% | 1.0% |
| Street Lighting | 12.5% | 57.2%* | 20.8% | 6.2% | 2.0% | 1.0% |

Q8: Please use the space below to provide any additional comments about your ratings for these service levels.

**Optional question: 34 responses were received for this open-ended question.*

Responses were analyzed to find the top themes that emerged from the data:

- **Roads, Lighting, and Infrastructure Maintenance (12 respondents):** Respondents expressed concerns about poor road conditions, inadequate street lighting, and lack of regular infrastructure maintenance, impacting overall safety and usability.
- **By-law Enforcement and Planning Concerns (8 respondents):** Respondents expressed concerns over perceived inconsistencies in By-law enforcement and a lack of adherence to the Official Plan.
- **Budget Allocation and Spending Efficiency (6 respondents):** Respondents raised issues with budget priorities, suggesting that funds could be spent more effectively.

Q9: How would you rate the overall value received from your tax dollars?

**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| Answer | Percentage of Responses |
|----------------|-------------------------|
| Excellent | 3.1% |
| Good | 28.1% |
| Fair | 39.6%* |
| Poor | 27.1% |
| I am not sure. | 2.1% |

Q10: Please use the space below to provide any additional comments regarding your value for money.

**Optional question: 29 responses were received for this open-ended question.*

Responses were analyzed to find the top themes that emerged from the data:

- **Value of Taxes (9 respondents):** Respondents expressed concerns over taxes and municipal fees being high, with residents feeling they don't receive adequate services in return.
- **Concerns Over Development and Planning Processes (8 respondents):** Respondents express dissatisfaction with the Town's approach to planning.
- **Spending Priorities (7 respondents):** Respondents feel municipal funds are ineffectively allocated and should prioritize essential infrastructure, like road maintenance and flood prevention.

Q11: Do you support the Town implementing additional revenue generating actions (i.e., increasing user fees, parking rates, etc.)?

**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| Answer | Percentage of Responses |
|--------|-------------------------|
| Yes | 61.5%* |
| No | 38.5% |

Q12: Please use the space below to provide any additional comments regarding revenue generation.

**Optional question: 33 responses were received for this open-ended question.*

Responses were analyzed to find the top themes that emerged from the data:

- **Increased Revenue from Tourism (17 respondents):** Respondents expressed that revenue-generating measures should target tourists, suggesting increased parking fees, accommodation taxes, and other tourist-focused levies to offset the impact of tourism on local infrastructure and services.
- **Prioritizing Efficient Use of Current Funds (8 respondents):** A general viewpoint for the Town to use existing funds more efficiently was expressed.
- **Minimizing Financial Burden on Residents (5 respondents):** Comments reflect a concern that rising fees and taxes are increasingly unaffordable for residents, with a preference for generating revenue through tourism rather than placing additional financial pressures on the local community.

Q13: Are there any specific new services or programs you would like to see introduced in Niagara-on-the-Lake?

**Optional question: 36 responses were received for this open-ended question.*

Responses were analyzed to find the top themes that emerged from the data:

- **Improvement in Transportation and Parking Solutions (11 respondents):** Respondents called for enhanced transportation options, including a reliable bus system, shuttle services, and expanded parking solutions to alleviate congestion, especially during peak tourist seasons.
- **Desire for Recreational and Community Facilities (10 respondents):** Respondents expressed a desire for new recreational facilities, particularly an indoor pool, a community center in St. Davids, and expanded fitness and arts programs to serve residents of all ages.

- **Focus on Essential Services and Accessibility (8 respondents):** Respondents emphasized the need for core services such as healthcare (urgent care or hospital), senior transportation, and an enhanced sidewalk network, with a focus on improving accessibility and supporting local families.

Q14: What would you say are the top 3 priorities for the Niagara-on-the-Lake community right now?

**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| Answer | Percentage of Responses |
|--|-------------------------|
| Acting Living – Parks and Trails | 16.6% |
| Active Living – Recreation and Facilities | 19.8% |
| Active Transportation | 12.5% |
| Affordable Housing | 20.8%* |
| Arts and Culture | 9.4% |
| Community Engagement | 15.6% |
| Downtown Revitalization | 13.5% |
| Economic Development | 13.5% |
| Economy | 6.3% |
| Emergency Management | 4.2% |
| Environment, Climate Change and Sustainability | 9.4% |
| Infrastructure – Roads and Bridges | 38.5%* |
| Infrastructure – Stormwater | 20.8%* |
| Infrastructure – Wastewater | 8.3% |
| Infrastructure – Water | 4.2% |
| Library Services | 6.3% |
| Quality Neighbourhoods – Planning & Building | 26.0%* |
| Quality Neighbourhoods – Property Standards and By-law | 11.5% |
| Safe Communities – Fire & Emergency Services | 14.6% |
| Transparency and Communication | 15.6% |
| Winter Control | 2.1% |
| I don't know | 0% |
| Other (please specify) | 5.2% |

Q15: Using the space below, please provide any additional feedback regarding the Town's 2025 budget.

**Optional question: 29 responses were received for this open-ended question.*

Responses were analyzed to find the top themes that emerged from the data:

- **High Property Taxes (12 respondents):** Respondents expressed concerns about high property taxes, suggesting alternative revenue sources like tourism taxes or cuts to non-essential expenses to avoid further tax increases for residents.
- **Development and Heritage Preservation (8 respondents):** Respondents expressed support for preserving the Town's heritage and controlling development, with calls to protect historic areas, avoid over-development, and ensure that infrastructure and projects prioritize residents.

- **Infrastructure and Environmental Preparedness (5 respondents):** Respondents highlighted the need for better infrastructure planning and environmental resilience, including improved flood prevention, effective transportation options, and review of project costs to address community needs sustainably.

Q16: How well do you feel you understand what your municipal taxes are used for?

**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| Answer | Percentage of Responses |
|------------|-------------------------|
| Very well | 27.1% |
| Well | 41.7%* |
| Somewhat | 25.0% |
| A little | 6.3% |
| Not at all | 0% |

Q17: Keeping residents informed and engaged in the budget process is important to us. How would you like to be kept informed? (Select all that apply.)

**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| Answer | Percentage of Responses |
|--|-------------------------|
| Council Budget Meetings | 32.2% |
| Email or e-alerts from the Town's website | 68.7%* |
| Summary document or fact sheet/infographic | 53.1% |
| Social Media | 30.2% |
| Website Updates | 42.7% |
| Other (please specify) | 2.0% |

Q18: How would you rate this survey?

**Mandatory question: 96 responses.*

| Answer | Percentage of Responses |
|--------------|-------------------------|
| Very Good | 8.3% |
| Good | 29.2% |
| Satisfactory | 56.3%* |
| Poor | 6.3% |
| Very Poor | 0% |

NEXT STEP / CONCLUSION

Council is encouraged to review the results of the survey, as presented in this Report, and consider the responses and comments when developing and finalizing the 2025 budget.

Upon approval of the 2025 budget, Staff will issue a news release advising of the final approval and release a video summarizing the budget impact and allocation. These communication efforts aim to foster transparency and ensure the community is well-informed about the decisions that shape our fiscal landscape.